Winter Wonderland
A Pokémon Holiday & Winter Zine

Winter Wonderland: A Pokémon Holiday and Winter Zine
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Contributors are credited on both their pieces and in the Table of Contents.

# Winter Wonderland

## A Pokémon Holiday & Winter Zine

Thank you for your interest in this zine! Our 90+ contributors put so much love into their pieces, and it shows! A special thank you to those contributors, who not only volunteered their precious time and energy towards this zine, but also worked wonders in spite of the road bumps and holiday hassle! They are exceptional and I hope you love their works as much as we do!

A little note from Skies: A very special thank you to all of my moderators! This was my first zine as Head Mod, and I went it not realizing how much I had to learn. My moderators were not only an incredible help to me and the contributors, but taught me so much that I can now take in to other projects.

From me, to my moderators, to my contributors and to you:

Thank you for spending this time with me and
helping me to create this zine, and share it with others to enjoy!

Happy Holidays, and Stay Warm!

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# Flowers that Bellossom in Winter

As the towering buildings of the Goldenrod landscape came into view, Erika marveled at how similar it looked to her own home town of Celadon. It was a sprawling metropolis, bustling streets and influential businesses made it the shopping district of the Johto region. She watched with fond affection as Gloom peered out of the window, equally as fascinated with their new surroundings. In her lap, a tiny Oddish dozed.

The Oddish was small for her species, and had been left outside of the gym just a few short weeks before. Presumably abandoned by her trainer, and terrified of being alone. Erika couldn't leave her behind. This business trip had been planned for months, but she had so recently obtained Oddish's trust, to leave the Pokemon at the gym — despite how well the Gym Trainers would've taken care of her — seemed cruel, and counter-productive. She hoped that one day Oddish would feel secure enough to let one of the Gym Trainers adopt her entirely. Being a gym leader and a cosmetic entrepreneur was busy work, and Erika knew she wouldn't always have the time that the Oddish needed or deserved.

Unsurprisingly, Gloom had taken to the little Oddish quite readily. It wasn't uncommon to find the Oddish trailing after Gloom through the luscious gardens of the gym, letting out its own sweet scent in contentment.

But the Oddish hadn't left the gym since that day they found her, and she was so accustomed to the temperature controlled solarium that the chill was hitting her hard now. Her small body shook as Erika held her closer, readjusted her on her lap. She would likely be carrying her a lot on this trip.

Though Erika had not ever left Kanto before, she had known that Johto wasn't all that different. It was a neighboring region, with many cultural similarities. The bus grew ever closer to the drop off point, right outside the radio tower, a tourist attraction in its own right, and certainly a part of the draw for tourists from every region. Erika had studied the map meticulously, it wasn't hard to find one in a travel brochure. She knew it wouldn't be hard to locate the department store.

The holiday season was well underway, and the more temperamental Johto climate had slush lining the streets as sleet continued to swirl in the icy wind. Despite the chill people were in high spirits, rushing to finish their shopping with their Pokémon in tow. It wasn't a long walk to their destination, but still Erika kept her peripheral on Gloom as he ambled along beside her, the wind tossed and ruffled his leaves, but he was otherwise unphased.

It was going to be a big year for the perfume company. *The Heather* had steadily increased in popularity, and was now shipping region-wide in Kanto. The opportunity to establish connections in the neighboring region, to sell at the Goldenrod department store, couldn't be overstated. If everything went well, Erika could see the opportunity for many more trips to Johto in her future.

Perhaps even at some point she'd have the chance to see — and maybe even catch — some Johto Grass-type Pokémon. Each Grass-type Pokémon had their own unique aroma, tied to various plants from their native regions. The earthy musk of Gloom's spores was one of the most common ingredients in developing layered fragrances.

The Oddish wiggled in Erika's grasp, stretching to look around. She'd never seen so many people. As they entered the grand foyer of the department store a large portion of it was cordoned off. The Oddish looked up and up, and up still at the gargantuan Christmas tree that had been erected. Decorators with their partner Pokémon were meticulously decorating. An Aipom hung from a light fixture as it precariously balanced the star on the top. A Smeargle painted a large wooden structure that nearly resembled a sleigh. Oddish had never felt so small.

Erika approached the front desk hastily, relieved to get out of the brisk winter air. The receptionist eyed the Aipom with mild trepidation, but turned to smile as Erika approached. Her face immediately split into a megawatt grin.

"Baby!" She squealed as she spied the tiny Oddish. Erika smiled indulgently at the worker, and tried to adjust the small creature in her grasp, and coax her into saying hello.

Erika found it refreshing that somebody would find the small Grass-type adorable, endearing in the same way that people found human babies and tiny Evee to be. Erika was excited to see what Johto had to offer, and wondered if any of their native Grass-types were favored among the people.

"Hi, I'm Erika! I'm the founder of *The Heather* perfumes," Erika introduced herself. "I have a consultation arranged with Mr Crocus, the director."

"Oh!" The receptionist responded, "He told me you were coming. Mr Crocus should be on the third floor setting up a display, please head right on up whenever you're ready. Who's this little one?"

"This is an Oddish I'm fostering," Erika explained. "I'm also a Grass-type Gym Leader in the Kanto region. Oddish was abandoned outside my Gym not too long ago. She took a liking to my Gloom, and it would have caused her unnecessary stress to leave her behind."

Her voice had grown soft, full of melancholy. As someone who had devoted her life to Pokémon, it was incomprehensible that someone could just throw them aside. A furrow had developed in her brow as she glanced down at the tiny creature in her embrace.

"Oh, no," the worker breathed. "That's terrible. I hope she finds her forever home soon."

Erika thanked the worker and carefully side-stepped the array of tools and baubles that littered the area as the decorating continued. It didn't take long to make it to the first of the escalators, and Erika reached a hand out to gently guide her Gloom as he fumbled on the first step as it moved beneath him. The little Oddish's mouth formed a surprised little 'o' as they started to ascend.

Gloom seemed fascinated and gleefully hopped off of the belt as they reached their destination.

The display, when it came into view, was breathtaking. Erika barely contained an awe-filled gasp as a large floral arrangement towered overhead, shaped and styled to resemble a Christmas tree. The flowers were false — had to be in order for the display to endure the entire holiday season — but they were delicate and intricately made, looking close to the real thing. Mr Crocus spotted her quickly and beckoned her over with a wide grin and a call of her name.

“What do you think?” He asked as soon as she’d stepped up beside him.

“It’s beautiful,” she praised. “Beyond what I could have imagined.”

“I’m glad you think so!” He enthused. “We still need an ornament for the topper, and I thought it would be a nice touch to have you decide what that should be. Our creative team can produce whatever you would like.”

Erika pursed her lips in thought as she considered the options. The star was such a classic staple, an elegant yet simple shape that would complete the image well, but it also seemed too bland a choice for such a grand display. That’s when the thought struck. The Rainbow Badge. The badge of the Celadon gym would be perfect, its geometric flower design was somewhat akin to a star, and its colors would compliment the myriad of florals within the existing piece. Erika also couldn’t help but long for a personal touch for the display that would be used to advertise her products.

Erika had poured her everything into her career, and her work as a Gym Leader and as a perfumer were intrinsically tied.

With a proud smile she shifted the tiny Oddish in her grasp to reveal the Rainbow Badge she had pinned to her lapel. She quickly unclasped it and handed it to the director.

“This,” she said, “If this design could be fashioned into a tree-topper I think it would be perfect.”

“Then it’ll be perfect!” He vowed and curled his fingers tightly around the badge before putting it in his pocket. “I’m also thinking of having some of the staff who work this floor allow their Grass-type Pokémon out of their Pokéballs whilst here, but only those who have Pokémon that can be found in Kanto. I’ve read a lot about how you’ve utilized the natural scents and capabilities of your Pokémon as a part of your process.”

“Wow,” Erika breathed. “That sounds incredible.”

Erika was endlessly proud of her process. She had taken great care to ensure that Pokémon were at the heart of everything she did, and her love of Grass-types in particular was profound, to have that in some way honored would be icing on the cake. Even if people were not normally inclined to buy perfumes, everybody loved Pokémon, and having the same kind of Pokémon who had helped her business flourish around would inevitably draw in more and more people to this floor, and to this display, and ultimately, to her product.

She was really feeling like Mr Crocus had a true grasp of who she was and what her brand embodied. Erika felt further vindicated in her decision to branch out into this neighboring region. She hoped to leave a lasting impression.

She hoped this region would become a second home to her, somewhere where she could open her own store, and work with native Pokémon to create new and exciting scents.

The director finally turned his attention to Erika's companions, briefly getting down on one knee to greet Gloom, he gently patted the top of his fungus in acknowledgment. With a smile he righted himself and addressed the tiny Oddish in her grasp.

"I've always been a fan of the Oddish evolutionary line myself," he finally told her.

"Really?" Erika asked, surprised. She was accustomed to — and often dismayed by — people underestimating the Weed Pokémon that were often outmatched by others of their Type, predominantly Pokémon like Bulbasaur, and even sometimes Bellsprout.

"Yes, they were one of the first branched evolutionary lines discovered, a capability that was long only thought to belong to Eevee."

"Really?" Erika gushed. She had heard of the branched evolutions that existed in other regions, and knew that Johto had a few. But, Johto and Kanto were so similar in their climate and culture, and so close to one another, she'd never dreamed that the plant life or environment would allow existing species to have to adapt, especially the Grass-types.

Just then the soft ding of the elevator sounded, and an enthusiastic young trainer stepped out. He wore his cap the wrong way around and his shoes were caked in mud, flecks of it splashed up the bare skin of his legs. Erika's first thought was that it was far too cold for *shorts*. Even still, the almost wild glint in his eyes, and the wide stretch of his smile spoke of adventure. He had a crumpled, haphazardly wrapped parcel tucked under one arm, and his other rose into the air as he began to wave.

"Hi, you're Mr Crocus, right?" The young boy asked.

"I am, do I know you?" The director asked, his brow furrowed and his eyes were trained to the streaks of mud that were now evident against the bright, marble floor. His lips pursed.

"Nope," he popped the 'P'. "My name's Ethan. Professor Elm is my neighbor and he told me to bring this to you, he knew I was heading this way to challenge Whitney." He thrust the parcel forward.

Erika couldn't help but quirk a brow at the unabashed confidence of the young man, he had all the markings of a budding Pokémon master. The Pokéballs that adorned his belt were a dead giveaway, as well as the disheveled attire that spoke only of all-weather adventure. Plus, he'd mentioned Whitney, and the city's resident Gym Leader had of course come up in the research Erika had done on Goldenrod.

Mr Crocus took the package with a grateful nod and tucked it under his arm, "Good luck on your Gym Battle then, Ethan. Thank you for bringing me this."

"I'm gonna smash it!" Ethan scoffed, "Whitney isn't gonna know what hit her! With my Bellosom's status moves, that Miltank of hers won't get a chance to build up its Rollout!"

"Ah!" Mr Crocus said in surprise. "A Bellosom, eh? What an incredible coincidence! Erika and I were just discussing the branched evolutions of Johto."

Ethan turned to look at Erika then, as if only now realizing someone else was standing with them. Gloom was gazing up at him with rapt curiosity, Oddish seemed oblivious, and was almost dozing in Erika's hold. Ethan's eyes flicked over Erika's face almost dismissively, clearly not recognizing the Gym-leader in his presence, but his eyes quickly lit up as he regarded Gloom and Oddish. He stepped forward, and almost instinctively he reached out a hand to pat the fungus atop of Gloom's head.

"Wow, my Bellosom evolved not too long ago!" He enthused. "I had a Gloom for so long, I couldn't decide which evolution to go with!"

"Nice to meet you, Ethan. I'm Erika, and I'm a Gym-leader in the Kanto region," Erika said, smiling politely. "It's always exciting to see trainers on their journeys. My Gloom has been my partner since I was a child, my friend before I ever became a trainer. I don't think I'd ever want to evolve him."

"Gloom-gloom!" Gloom exclaimed happily, and smiled up at Erika with such trust and fond affection.

"That's awesome! Maybe once I've become the champion of Johto I'll come and take Kanto, too!"

"I look forward to challenging you," Erika said indulgently. "But, Gloom and I don't go down easy."

"Would you like to see my Bellosom?" Ethan asked then. He seemed boundless in energy, almost vibrating with excitement. There was a glint of hero-worship in his eyes, a hard edge of confidence that Erika had seen in the faces of every budding Pokémon master.

Before Erika even had the chance to respond, Ethan retrieved a Pokéball from his belt and released the clasp. The red glow of kinetic energy and the soft whir of the device gave way to a poised silhouette. His Pokémon — a Bellosom — appeared and stared up at its master with adoration.

Erika was struck by how delicate it looked. Its large florals were in perfect symmetry atop its head. Its eyes were wide and expressive, but gave way to a deep intelligence. An immaculate petticoat of luscious leaves draped uniformly to the ground. A sweet yet tangy scent filled the air, almost like citrus, something tropical and exotic. It made Erika think of warmth and summer. The Bellosom almost seemed to sparkle, its skirt of foliage swished as it moved, as if in a dance, whilst spores of golden pollen trailed behind it in a gentle haze. With a wondrous gasp, Erika admired its beauty.

For the first time since they'd left Celadon, the tiny Oddish in her care seemed eager to leave her arms. It wiggled and strained, and eventually jumped down to the ground. With confidence, and a forward curiosity that Erika had not yet seen it display, the Oddish padded over to the Bellosom. Its eyes were alight with admiration, and its mouth formed a perfect 'o'. The Bellosom turned and greeted the Oddish in a light, soprano trill. The Oddish chirped happily in response.

"It's beautiful," Erika breathed in wonder.

"Yeah!" Ethan enthused. "It loses the dual typing, but it's more defensively bulky than a Vileplume. All it takes is a Sunstone. Plus, I already have a Crobat so I've got the poison-type covered."

"It seems my little Oddish has taken a liking to your Bellosom," Erika smiled gently. "You must be a very good trainer."

Erika had learnt about the Friendship evolutions that some Pokémon had developed, though they originated outside of Kanto, there were a few Kanto native Pokémon that it applied to. As Pokémon training became more prevalent and wide-spread it didn't take long for trainers to learn that certain Pokémon had the ability to access additional power for trainers that they felt loyal to. For Ethan to have a Crobat so early in his journey, he must have taken special care of his Pokémon.

They watched as Gloom also made his way over to Ethan's Bellossom, and the three different evolution stages seemed to be conversing happily. It was a wondrous and encouraging thing to see these Pokémon interact so easily, the respect and admiration they seemed to have for eachother, as if recognizing their kin. Erika saw in the Bellossom the potential of both her Gloom and the little Oddish she had grown to love.

It also wasn't lost on Erika that this was the first time she'd truly viewed the Oddish as being hers. Since she'd first found her shivering in the cold, she had felt compelled to care for her, but with all of her other responsibilities and deadlines, she hadn't felt that she had the capacity to care for a Pokémon in Oddish's position.

An abandoned Pokémon needed love and affection and time. Despite that, Erika found she had grown fond of the little , and perhaps she was capable of taking on the task of raising the Oddish herself after all.

"I'm gonna be the best in every region! Just you wait!" Ethan crowed.

Just then Mr Crocus cleared his throat purposefully, and Erika blushed faintly at the interruption. She'd been so caught up in the Bellosom's beauty and the potential of Grass-types in this region, that she'd almost forgotten she'd come here for a reason. It was unprofessional to say the least, she'd essentially been ignoring her host. It was time to take her Gym-leader hat off, and put the business woman hat back on. She straightened her posture, and wandered back to the display.

"Thank you for bringing this to me, Ethan," The director said pointedly, holding up the parcel. "Good luck with your Gym battle."

Clearly recognized that he was being dismissed, and looking appropriately chagrined, Ethan bowed his head respectively.

"I'll see you around, Mr Crocus. I look forward to battling you, Erika." He bid his farewell, and with that he withdrew his Bellossom.

The tiny Oddish's demeanor changed immediately, its little mouth turned down in a frown as its leaves seemed to wilt. It dutifully returned to Erika's side. Erik wasted no time in scooping it into her embrace.

Now that she had made an internal vow to raise this Oddish as her own, she knew she would help it reach its fullest potential.

“I look forward to it,” she said to Ethan, and with a nod he made his way back to the elevator, no doubt to continue his journey and raise more Pokémon with pride.

Erika turned her attention back to Mr Crocus with renewed vigor. The more she looked at the display, the more she trusted that her brand would be well represented, and the way that her little Oddish was blossoming before her eyes had her eager to return home.

As the day passed they discussed more and more about which flowers Erika wanted to include in the display - ones that blossomed in winter would add a great Christmas touch. They poke about Erika’s history as a botany student, and how it was that venture that led her to a love of scents and perfumes. She spoke proudly of how her two careers went so seamlessly hand-in-hand. Mr Crocus was attentive, a wise and experienced salesman. It truly felt like the beginning of an unstoppable business partnership.

The meeting wrapped up rather quickly after that, with just a few forms and papers to sign. Mr Crocus even invited her to look around the rest of the store, and afforded her an employee discount. He said he was never one for all work and no play. Following was an indulgent Christmas shop around the store's many well-stocked floors to bring the day to an eventful close. Erika left Goldenrod feeling more determined than ever before.

The trip back to Celadon didn't seem quite so long and daunting.

The long day had Erika and her companions dozing for most of it, and with the nervous anticipation replaced with proud satisfaction it was all too easy to relax.

Within days of returning to the Gym and actively training the little Oddish, it evolved into a Gloom. Erika was filled with fond pride at this achievement, and tried not to dwell on thoughts of its previous trainer, who had seemingly abandoned her for no reason. As soon as the Oddish had begun to trust Erika, to realize she had a home now and someone to depend on, she was a fast learner, eager to please and with a pleasant temperament. Seeing the two Glooms interact was a surreal, and sometimes even amusing sight. Their personalities were so widely different and their deference to each other was adorable. Erika was proud that she was the only one who could tell them apart on sight.

Her original Gloom would always be her best friend, and would likely always remain a Gloom. However, the new arrival seemed to be boundless in energy as the days passed. There was a restlessness apparent in the ways she fidgeted, the way she struggled to remain on the side-lines and watch others battle, as though she was all too eager to enter the fray. Erika couldn't help but think that her new Gloom was itching to evolve further, eager to ascend to a new level of capabilities.

Erika thought back to the evolution stones she’d purchased at Goldenrod. She pictured the Sun Stone that was bought specifically for that tiny Oddish, who had been so enamored with that Bellosom they'd met. But she'd also bought herself a Leaf Stone, not for any particular purpose, but just because she wanted to have all of the resources a good Grass-type trainer should.

She trusted it would come in handy one day. Christmas day came fast and furious, Erika and her Gym-trainers arranged a bountiful feast. All of the Pokémon were free of their Pokéballs, all socializing and frolicking amongst the foliage of the gym. Gifts were exchanged and laughter was abundant. But there was one specific gift that Erika left until last.

As the bright winter sun shone through the high, glass ceiling Erika approached the two Glooms that were playing under the canopy. Her old friend was the first to notice her arrival, and turned to her with great love and trust, however remained calm and stoic. The new Gloom bounded over to Erika's side, gazed up in expectation, always eager to do whatever was asked.

Erika smiled down at the creature, and felt a small pang of guilt that she had ever considered passing this Pokémon to anybody else. She could see now that it was destined to be hers all along.

Erika reached into the pocket of her kimono to retrieve the crumpled paper gift bag. She unwrapped the Sun Stone, marveled again at how something so tiny could hold such great power. Erika fell to her knees before the Gloom, and could feel the eyes on her as the other trainers and their Pokémon began to gather around. With an encouraging smile she placed the stone in the Gloom's grasp.

In the next second a bright, golden light seemed to encompass the Gloom's whole being.

The silhouette shifted and shimmered, distorted until it took on a whole new shape entirely. Gasps of wonder were heard in tandem as the light started to fade and the form settled. That same layered, tropic scent filled her senses as her brand new Bellossom gazed up at her. It twirled in place, and looked down to admire its own leaves as they danced. Erika felt her eyes become misty as she saw this Pokémon truly come into its own. She had watched it blossom in more ways than one, and she truly had no doubts that it was where it was supposed to be, and it was happy.

"Flowers that Bellossom in Winter"

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# Elements of a Cold Winter's Night

The young Eevee reluctantly pressed her front paw into the snow. An unfamiliar feeling it was, considering she had only hatched a couple of months prior during a rather warm springtime. She had only experienced the pleasure of long hours of sun, with the occasional rain interrupting the fair weather. The sun was comforting, and the rain was all too much fun for her to splash in, despite protests from the others.

Freshly fallen winter snow appeared to be neither comforting nor fun for a first experience. It crunched beneath her paws, causing her to recoil backwards in surprise at the sheer cold of its temperature. A very new feeling, it was, but she couldn't cower for long, as the rest of the Eeveeloutions that she lived with had already scattered outside. So that she wouldn't be left behind, she had to complete her first steps now.

Thankfully, her fur had grown in enough for frostbite to not pose a direct threat, but the first few steps were rather dreadful for her when it felt like she was sinking into a chilling sandpit with every movement. Individual steps were not working out well for her tiny body. Instead of trudging through the yard step by exhausting step, she discovered that little hops were a far more effective movement strategy.

Now, all she had to do was to find somewhere, anywhere that she could fit in.

Of course, she could always do her own thing, but this was her first winter. The young Eevee had no concept of what outdoor winter activities even consisted of.

The small lake harbored a Glaceon joyfully staking around on the surface of the ice, using his claws as if they were ice skates. He moved ever so gracefully, lightly cutting through the surface and kicking up sparkling ice dust with every stroke. The Eevee was captivated by his noble, graceful movements. At such high speeds, he retained such great control allowing him to perform jumps and twirls as he pleased. Every landing on the ice was smooth and flawless, naturally transitioning between acrobatics and sliding along the surface of the ice. It was only logical, as the Glaceon was at home in this type of weather.

The Sylveon, though he was rather clumsy compared to the Glaceon in this weather, joined in for a brief moment. He stumbled and tripped on the ice until he found his footing and built up enough speed in order to stabilize himself, but he cried out in delight when he finally found his footing and was kicking up almost as much ice as the Glaceon. The Glaceon reached his paw out to the Sylveon, offering what the Eevee thought was destined to be a grand performance.

To her surprise, and probably the Sylveon's as well, that was not necessarily the case.

The Sylveon grabbed ahold of the Glaceon's paw with his feelers and was spun around a few times by the Glaceon

They were spinning rather slowly at first, but quickly picked up speed, sending a mist of ice crystals swirling around them. Inexperience considered, the Sylveon was not suited for this extensive of a show, and so his feelers lost grip on the Glaceon's paw. The Glaceon remained steady, while the Sylveon was flung off of the lake into the snow.

Hopping over to make sure he was okay, the Eevee shot a glare at the clearly amused Glaceon. With her "threat" gone unnoticed, she turned her attention to the Sylveon still laying face first in the snow. She pawed at him gently with great concern, but was rather relieved and a bit bewildered when he lifted his head up and began laughing almost as hard as the Glaceon was.

Could it be fun? Maybe, but she could barely navigate the inches of snow on the ground; there was no way she would be proficient in walking on ice. Letting her curiosity get the better of her, the Eevee stumbled onto the frozen lake to attempt to circle the surface at least once.

Immediately, her legs began to slide all over the place. Every time she managed to steady one leg, another would give out. The Glaceon saw her scrambling to regain her footing, and so he slid over and nudged her upwards until she was steady. As much as she wanted to skate as gracefully as the Glaceon, the two of them were in agreement that she was not quite ready to give it a go, and so he guided her off of the lake's surface to safer land.

Since attempting to ice skate did not end so well, the Eevee bid the graceful Glaceon and snow-covered Sylveon farewell, and hopped through the snow once again to find out what the others were up to.

Perhaps an activity more suited to the clumsy would be more appropriate...

In the midst of her expedition, the Eevee ran into the Vaporeon who seemed to have almost as many problems navigating the yard as she was. It was a miracle that she was up and moving in these temperatures anyways, as the biological structure of a Vaporeon is comparable to that of water's properties.

In low temperatures, water turns to solid ice. Considering the characteristics of Vaporeon, it wasn't hard to discern why winter was a problem.

She was doing her best to avoid stepping into any heavily frosted areas. Especially those that were damp, yet not completely frozen. The Vaporeon had absolutely no interest in freezing herself to the ground as, humiliation aside, it could bring great harm to her health. On the contrary, the young Eevee had little to nothing to worry about, as her thick fur coat provided all of the protection could need from the elements.

Though she was fine, and the Vaporeon was not, there was still not much to be experienced from avoiding patches of ice and cold water out of fear of freezing. She still seemed happy to be outside, albeit a little cold, but she wasn't too keen on joining in the fun. Still, the young Eevee stayed by her side for a little, happily chirping away. She appreciated the company, despite not being as involved as the others.

Unfortunately, the Vaporeon's company was short-lived, as the Eevee did not find much fun in carefully traversing the winter landscape.

Bidding a farewell to the Vaporeon, the Eevee left her side and continued trudging through the snow. As much as she would've loved to provide some form of entertainment for the Vaporeon, the curiosity of her first snow was eating away at her, and she had to satisfy her craving for adventure.

As she was hopping through the snow, her eyes caught sight of vibrant green, red, and white lights occasionally flashing on and off. At first, she caught only a brief glimpse of them out of the corner of her eye, thinking that perhaps she was imagining things. Then, the lights flashed on and off again; sometimes they would stay lit for a few moments, other times, they would go out as quickly as they came on.

Anything bright and shiny was irresistible to an Eevee as young as she was, so once she caught direction of the lights' source, she changed course and began hopping along on her stubby little legs through the snow. Along the fence, around some lamp posts, and even laying on the chair, was a string of holiday lights. Or perhaps, multiple strings, as she couldn't exactly tell due to the sheer size.

The sound of frustrated growls above her startled her, and she quickly looked up for fear of being jumped. However, the frustrationwas not being directed at her, but rather, the Christmas lights themselves. The growls came from a rather annoyed Jolteon, with a string of lights in its mouth attempting to hang them all while balancing on a ladder. He was repeatedly tossing them onto a fence post, attempting to drape them throughout the length of the fence, but he was faced with more failures than successes. And with every failure, came increasingly frustrated growls.

Her answer as to the source of the light was answered too, as he would occasionally shock the string of lights in an attempt to get them to stay on. The longest the string of lights had stayed on was a few seconds, tops, and that was likely only due to the sheer strength of the Jolteon's thunderbolt. It would be a real shame for him to go through all of that effort to hang the lights, only for one bad bulb to ruin the entire string.

She wasn't alive yet when they acquired these Christmas lights, but they looked much older relative to the lamps she was familiar with inside. She could assume that these blubs were well beyond outdated, and that perhaps it was time to move onto new decorations. At one end of the light string was a rather tangled mess, something that she could only assume that the Jolteon was untangling as he went on. From her point of view, it seemed to be all too frustrating of an ordeal, rather than fun like she assumed that holiday activities were supposed to be?

Perhaps this was simply one of the more...difficult ordeals of the holiday season. Something that wasn't necessarily fun, but rather, was out of pure necessity. The Eevee wanted to imply the suggestion that new lights should be considered, but realistically, how could Pokémon  go about acquiring new lights, without even currency of their own to exchange with the humans? Regardless, she felt as if the effort was far greater than the reward, so she chirped for the Jolteon to reconsider. He growled in response, though it was more likely directed to the stubborn wiring rather than the Eevee herself.

Since he seemed adamant about hanging this particular string of lights, she offered to extend a paw to assist in the decorating in any way that she could. Surprisingly mindful of his tone, the Jolteon uttered a small growl in response, declining her assistance. He gestured for her to keep her distance, as the quality of these not-so-finely-aged bulbs were rather questionable, especially in terms of safety.

Begrudigly obeying his commands, she took a few steps backwards, and after he miraculously draped more of the lights across the post, he gave the string of lights another good shocking. The Jolteon struck the string of lights with such force that she worried that he could've popped a bulb with that kind of energy. And then, the string of lights would not only be rendered completely useless, but also a safety hazard. In the case of an unintended explosion, she bid the Jolteon a farewell, though he might have not noticed her through his frustration for the decorations. She wasn't pestering him further, and so she hopped well out of his way before continuing to once again, attempt to find her place.

Though her fur was rather thick, the Eevee was beginning to feel the effects of prolonged cold exposure on her body. It felt as if she was beginning to slow, with her energy all of a sudden dwindling. She still had the strength to carry on, as she would've turned back by now if she was truly feeling some adverse effects, but she was not afraid to confess to craving some sort of warmth right about now.

Catching up to her little hops was the Flareon, leaving behind a trail of melted snow behind her.

The heat from her paws instantly melted the snow beneath her feet into a pool of water, and her footsteps were close enough together forming a relatively safe, melted path behind her.

In these temperatures, however, the safety of the path could not be assured for too long, as the pooled water would freeze into a layer of ice in a matter of minutes. For where she was going with her high body heat taken into account, she would have little to worry about. The young Eevee, however, would have to watch her step and not trail too far behind on the solid ground, so she was cautioned to stay close.

Her presence was quite welcome. Perhaps she knew that the Eevee was beginning to shiver, as she quite literally warmed right up to her. A vague suggestion was made by the Flareon to return inside to the warmth, where the Eevee would not have to concern herself with monitoring her condition, but she insisted on staying outside with the rest of the bunch.

She may have been having a bit of a hard time finding her place, with all activities being either too advanced for her age or simply not engaging enough, but that did not deter her from attempting to find some way to experience her first winter to the fullest.

There were always nicer days and future winters, indeed, but one only gets one first winter. The Eevee was determined to live it to the fullest, which meant spending every single possible second hopping through the snow, basking in the festive lights, and just about whatever else could fall under the umbrella of wintertime activities.

The heat from the Flareon was drawing her in with every step she took, as she so desperately wanted to hop onto her fur and fall asleep in total comfort. The desire to explore overcame those desires, and so she continued pressing on, fighting off these impulsive urges.

With her occasionally "accidentally" bumping into the Flareon for a brief moment of engulfing warmth, it was likely no secret that she was craving the comfort of a furry fireplace. She had made it clear countless times that it was perfectly acceptable to retreat into the comfort of the cabin, but the Eevee insisted; the season was all about adventure, *adventure,* and *more adventure.*

Their playful back and forth of "it's okay to head back inside" and "I want to explore more" was interrupted by a curled-up ball huddling under the tree. The two of them immediately recognized the pale body and leafy structure of its ears and, assuming the worst, made haste to scope out the situation of their friend.

The Leafeon, usually bountiful and full of seemingly never-ending energy, was curled up tightly underneath a tree, shielding his eyes from the environment and attempting to tuck in his limbs. He was even less suited for the cold than the Eevee was, with shorter fur and a more plant-like structure, so it was a mystery as to why he was even pushing himself in such a way. The usual vibrant green of his leaves were a wilted, muddy brown-green color, and he was so desperately trying to compress his body to reduce the loss of what little heat he had.

Shaking her head, the Flareon curled up next to him without hesitation, and within moments, he perked his head up once again. The Eevee, still in a state of shock, was rather amazed at how fast the color was starting to fade back into his body. On the contrary, any sense of worry quickly disappeared from the Flareon's face, as she looked at the still tired Leafeon with almost a sense of disgust.

She assumed that perhaps this was a common occurrence, as the Leafeon gave her a rather unapologetic smile despite likely on the verge of becoming very sick. A thought in the back of her mind told her that this was intentional; the Leafeon was doing this on purpose multiple times so that the Flareon would have to rescue him time and again. And now she was practically obligated to stay with him so that he would not freeze himself, if left unattended.

She couldn't help but giggle at the thought of these two, and the look of "what's so funny?" practically told her everything. As much as she wanted to, it was best to not playfully suggest anything, lest she ruin the mood for all three of them on this evening. A little sad she was about having to leave her personal heater behind, yes, but the joy of her sly little plan of leaving those two alone together negated any sense of loneliness that may attempt to intrude on her thoughts.

There were still two that she had yet to check up on, being the Espeon and Umbreon. She knew that where one was, the other was close by, as it was rather rare to see them separate. No doubt that they would probably be doing something *incredibly corny* together, such as sharing a warm drink or gazing up at the barely visible moon.

Or even, huddling for warmth, like what the Leafeon and Flareon were *totally not* doing. Only this time, it wasn't the cutesy banter that she could tease them about, no, they were full blown inseparable. It felt like every joking comment she made directed at the Espeon and Umbreon was met with complete acceptance of their actions, rather than any form of playful banter.

She wanted to play and be a little needle in someone's side, not… lost in another's eyes or whatever. Bleh.

Which is why those two would be the most perfect targets for her to crash.

And what do you know, look which overly compatible sun and moon Pokémon were laying together, thinking they were oh-so-slick for straying from the rest of the group?

Obviously, they were too "lost in each other's eyes," or whatever, to worry about the presence of others, so silence wasn't necessarily a virtue if she wanted to sneak up on them for a rather pleasant surprise. The crunch of the snow beneath her tiny little paws most likely didn't even reach their ears as she slowly approached them hop by hop. She would pause between every few hops, addressing the situation and considering the possibility that she might just be caught in the act.

Despite the multitude of clumsy hops, there was nothing. Not even a single twitchy ear. She even chirped ever so slightly to mock the two of them, and there was still no response.

She was so close to her target, though she decided to sit back and see if anything interesting would happen between the two. Maybe something funny would happen, she hoped, and she could roll her back in the snow and make her grand debut with some rather loud laughter. Or, she could unfortunately bare witness to that…icky romance stuff that she wasn't even remotely into (unless it was for her own humor and at the expense of others, see, the Flareon and Leafeon).

Despite this very real possibility, she decided to take a risk and wait it out. Nothing. Wait a few more minutes. Still nothing. It very quickly went from an entertaining pastime to a game of pure patience, something that she was not particularly skilled in. Every time she would prepare to make her presence known, she would hold herself back, hoping that maybe *something* interesting would unfold.

But nothing ever happened. They were too busy being lost in the night sky, or whatever, and she had had enough. She readied into position, and putting all of her strength into a single leap, pounced in between the Espeon and Umbreon.

It wasn't the scale of her little "roar" that scared them, but rather, her sudden appearance as they were clearly oblivious to their surroundings. All she could do was innocently smile and wag her fluffy tail, in a sort of begging for attention way, while the Espeon and Umbreon looked at each other, unsure of how to proceed. The Espeon seemed a little bit more amused by her "ferocious" nature, laughing off his previously startled reaction.

The Umbreon, however, was not quite as amused as her partner, looking at the Eevee with a scowl of annoyance. No death stare could possibly even begin to break through the rather innocent demeanor of an Eevee proud of what she had accomplished.

And, could you really hate a face like that for long? Neither her nor the Umbreon could bring themselves to tell the Eevee off for the rather rude interruption, and soon, all three of them were sitting together smiling from one big ear to another.

Knowing that she as being a little bit of a nuisance to these two, the Eevee remained sitting down in between them, ruining any chance of another session of staring into each other's eyes, which was something she was rather proud of.

Of course, the Espeon and Umbreon always *could*... but that would make things painfully awkward. Not just for the two of them, but the young Eevee as well, which is something that they would honestly not dare think of in the span of a lifetime.

The night was creeping up on the residence. It felt as if it had been well into four in the morning that they had been out, but it was midnight at the latest, early setting of the sun still distorting their sense of time. Though this was only the conclusion of one of many nights, the hesitation to head inside was prominent amongst all, as even the Umbreon was urging the Espeon and Eevee to retreat into the safety of the cabin.

Exhausted from her mini expedition throughout the entirety of the evening, the Espeon carried her on his back, giving those tiny little paws of hers a break from the constant hopping through the snow. As they made their way back, they called out for the others, signaling to regroup. Still fighting the urge to fall asleep, the Eevee held her head up as she watched the others come reuniting with each other as they heard the call to return.

The Jolteon had not quite finished stringing the lights and was visibly irritated, but the signal of the night's end must've been quite the relief for him, as he did not hesitate to drop his current attempt and return with the others. The Glaceon was a bit hesitant to return, as he appeared to be teaching the Sylveon how to properly skate, with some success, surprisingly.

Nevertheless, they heeded the call of reunion and navigated their way off of the frozen lake and trudged through to snow towards the cabin.

The Vaporeon seemed well ahead of them, all too eager to head back inside as she must've feared accidentally freezing herself to the ground. An understandable concern, for when one feels stiff from the cold even with fur, the aquatic had the right to be worried.

And, of course, the Leafeon and Flareon came back together, practically stuck to each other's side like glue. For the Leafeon's safety and wellbeing of course, absolutely nothing more than that. Now that was what the Eevee wanted to see, and she was going to make absolutely sure that neither of them would live this night own, and possibly many more to come.

The nine of them were all together once again, no longer distracted by whatever activity they have decided to partake in. What lies before them at long last was a cabin door: an escape to a comfortable, warm paradise.

As fun as the outdoors were to explore, the Eevee had to admit, her energy was depleting quickly, and she wasn't sure how much cold she could handle, Flareon by her side or not.

It wasn't so bad knowing that this was only the first of many winter nights to come. For now, the focus was warming up and resting together in the safe confines of the wooden walls.

Now that she had a better idea of what the winter had to bring, the young Eevee had all sorts of possibilities to explore throughout the season. Maybe she would take ice skating lessons with the Glaceon, or perhaps learn how to string lights properly with the Jolteon. If all else proved uninteresting, there was always the Umbreon and Espeon to annoy, as almost nothing beats deliberately getting in the way of a couple.

Almost, being the key word here, as she desired nothing more to curl up in front of the fireplace and sleep peacefully through the night.

"Elements of a Cold Winter's Night"
Part 1

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# Wintertime at Treasure Town

Life at Wigglytuff's Guild felt stuck in a routine lately. Tried to wake up earlier than Loudred, took part in morning cheers, saw what the bulletin board had for us to do, ate dinner at night, and headed back to bed. It was the same old thing for a while now, which was kind of relieving since I needed a break from restoring Temporal Tower with my good friend Munchlax, something that happened a little while ago.

But on one particular day, something felt a bit off. After the morning cheers, Chatot had something very important to say. "Attention, everyone," he said. "Due to unforeseen circumstances, I hereby declare the guild will take some time off to relax. I'm sure you all know what the circumstances in question are."

"Is it because of the snowfall?" Munchlax asked.

I looked outside the window, greeted by a thick blanket of something fluffy looking and white. Snow... fall? Is that what that white stuff outside is? What about it?

"Precisely," Chatot replied. He smiled wide. "Now go have fun and enjoy this wonderful season!"

"HOORAY!" Everyone cheered. Everyone except me.

As the other guild members were quick to head outside, I was stuck in place, confused with what had happened. Why was everyone so excited about this 'snowfall'? I might as well treat this like any other day and check the bulletin and notice boards to see if I can get some rank poi-

"Where are you going, Vulpix?"

...Munchlax? What was she still doing here?

"I was hoping to check out the two boards for new jobs," I explained. "You know, usual exploration team stuff."

"But Chatot said we can take the day off," Munchlax pointed out. "Come on! Let's have fun!"

"Doing what?" I asked. "What does one do during a 'snowfall'?"

Munchlax looked surprised. "...That's right," she realized. "The future was frozen in time. You never got to experience snow."

I nodded. Even after going through so much, my partner still confused me. What was she getting so excited abo-

"Well we'll just have to fix that!" Munchlax decided. She threw her arm around my neck. "I'll teach you how to have fun during the winter!"

***

Munchlax brought me outside the guild and into Treasure Town. I could feel a slight chill as I stepped on the ground, but the weather didn't really bother me. It was one of the perks of being a fire-type, I guess. Munchlax didn't seem bothered either, probably due to her Thick Fat ability.

Walking into town was a typical everyday occurrence for me at this point, but this time felt different. The snowfall covered the ground with some of it even building up on some of the shops roofs, some of which had blue banners. The shopkeepers were even wearing these red and white hats, including Duskull. This change in scenery felt so...different.

"Here we are, Vulpix," Munchlax said. She extended her hand towards the town. "Welcome to wintertime!"

I tilted my head slightly as I looked at the shops. "But this is Treasure Town," I stated.

"Well yeah, I know," Munchlax replied. "But this is Treasure Town during the winter. Life changes when it gets cold." She smiled wide. "The first stop is Kecleon Market for some new gear."

Without a second to waste, Munchlax dragged me over to the Kecleon brothers' shop, where we were greeted the usual way. "Welcome to our shop and wares!" the brothers greeted. "How may we help you?"

"Do you have your winter stock available?" Munchlax asked.

"Indeed we do!" the green Kecleon replied. "So what would you like?"

"Two Anti-Freeze Scarves!" Munchlax cheerfully answered as she slammed some Poke on the counter.

"Well you're in luck," the purple Kecleon spoke up. "We received those scarves early this morning." After accepting the Poke, he took out a wide selection of scarves. "Go ahead and take your pick!"

Usually the scarves at Kecleon Market were color-coded for identification purposes. But these 'anti-freeze scarves' looked different. Each of them had different colors and patterns. Of course, the whole concept just felt weird. I never heard of these scarves before. Were they a new item available at the shop?

"Oh, I like this one!" Munchlax chose, pointing to a brown scarf with a white mug design. She looked over at me. "So what do you like, Vulpix?"

"Um... This one," I decided as I pointed to a light blue/white scarf.

"Excellent choices!" the green Kecleon complimented. "These designs will suit you just fine."

***

After we made our purchases, we put on our new scarves...although Munchlax had to help me out due to my lack of opposable thumbs. But why did she buy these scarves? I'm a fire-type and she has her Thick Fat ability. What's the whole point of wearing them if cold weather isn't a big issue?

"And... done!" Munchlax proudly announced. "Now we're ready for the wintertime season!"

"But why?" I asked. "Aren't we kind of... immune to the cold?"

"Well yeah," Munchlax replied. "But an Anti-Freeze Scarf is a must-have for the season. It's part of Treasure Town's yearly tradition."

That only confused me further. "You wear scarves like this every year?" I wondered. "And what's this about a tradition?"

"Oh, that's because it's something we do in the winter," Munchlax clarified.

"Sounds fun..." I replied, feeling disheartened. All this talk about traditions reminded me of my own past. I don't really remember my human life all that well, but it must have been bleak and depressing. Living in a frozen timeline, unable to experience a snowfall or even wear colorful scarves...

Maybe it was a miracle I could avoid disappearing like Grovyle and Celebi.

Wait, why did I suddenly think about them...?

"What's with the glum face?" Munchlax suddenly asked.

"Huh?" I muttered as I looked back at my partner. "Just thinking about what life was like in that frozen timeline..."

"Oh..." Munchlax realized. But then she shook it off and smiled. "How about I show you more wintertime traditions to chase the sad feeling away?" She started walking ahead of me. "Come on! There's more to do at the beach!"

***

When Munchlax brought me over to the town's local beach, I was surprised to see so many Pokémon present. Between visiting teams and local residents, everyone was wearing multicolored scarves. There was also a small booth near Beach Cave's entrance, which appeared to be run by a familiar Bellsprout from none other than Team Flame. The sign on the booth was also confusing.

**Snowball Making Contest**

"A snowball-making contest...?" I read. "What's that?"

"A yearly tradition in Treasure Town," Munchlax answered. "On the first snowfall of the year, the locals hold a contest to see who can make the biggest snowball. The judges change every year, so it looks like the Pokémon of Team Flame are judging this year." She nudged me towards the booth. "Now let's sign up! We still have time!"

The next thing I knew, Munchlax brought me over to the booth. "Welcome to this year's Snowball Making Contest!" Bellsprout greeted us. "Would you like to sign up?"

"Of course," Munchlax answered. "Sign us up as Team Munchpix."

"Sure thing!" Bellsprout replied. Then he did a quick double-check. "Hang on... Vulpix, too?"

"Yeah," Munchlax insisted.

Bellsprout looked at me. "We provide a helpful tutorial for newcomers," he explained. "Do you want to learn more about the contest?"

"Yes," I stated. How does one judge boring old snowballs?

"Like Munchlax has probably told you, this contest is about rolling the biggest snowball," Bellsprout said. "You gather up a pile of snow, then roll it around in whichever way you want. You can use your hands, feet, or even your head. But you have to be quick about it, because you only have a timeframe of ten minutes." He smiled in hisown way. "Whoever rolls the biggest snowball in that amount of time wins!"

"That's it?" I asked.

"That's it!" Bellsprout happily repeated.

I was confused. This seemed like a lackluster sporting event. You roll a snowball during a time limit and you're judged by how big the snowball is? But looking around, I could see everyone's happy faces as they prepared for the contest. Teddiursa and Ursaring, Vigaroth, Aunty Kangaskhan and her child, Spoink, Teams Razor Wind and Ebony... Even Sunflora and Corphish were present. And they were all so... happy.

Is this what snowfalls are all about? Bringing Pokémon together to have fun?

I looked back at Bellsprout. "Okay," I decided. "Sign me and Munchlax up for the contest."

"Sure thing!" Bellsprout replied. He took out two numbered pendants. "Your official entry number is eight. Please take this time to prepare for the contest."

***

The next thing I knew, both me and Munchlax were wearing these numbered pendants and preparing for the contest to start. Now I wasn't sure how I could take part in it. Looking at my front paw, I was hit with the reminder that I no longer have opposable thumbs. I wasn't even sure if nudging the snowball with my head would be as effective, even if that was allowed for some Pokémon.

"What's wrong, Vulpix?" Munchlax suddenly asked.

"Hmm?" I muttered as I looked back at my trusted partner.

"You seemed a bit distracted," Munchlax stated while she held a mini-snowball. "Did the Dimensional Scream come back?"

"Not this time," I corrected. "I wasn't sure how to take part in this contest." I raised one of my front legs. "I can't grab things like you can. So how am I supposed to push a snowball?"

"What, you can't use your head?" Munchlax checked.

"Since when was the last time I did that to push things?" I pointed out.

Munchlax was about to say something, but she closed her mouth and thought for a while. "...Good point," she realized. "I was the one who did most of the pushing in mystery dungeons."

While we were still thinking of what to do, Shuppet floated over to us. "Is something the matter?" she asked.

"Oh, hi Shuppet," Munchlax greeted. "We're taking part in the contest, but we're having a hard time figuring out how Vulpix can participate."

"Do you have any advice?" I hopefully asked.

"Why, certainly!" Shuppet answered. "You see, Murkrow and I have taken part in these contests before. There were even a few years when we actually won."

That reveal confused me. "How could you and your partner win if neither of you-"

"Have proper arms or legs?" Shuppet finished. "I hate to reveal our ecrets, so you just have to get creative."

"Creative...?" I echoed.

"Yes, creative!" Shuppet gleefully emphasized. "Just look around you. Not everyone can push a snowball properly."

Shuppet was right. She, Murkrow, Spoink, Scyther, and Sunflora didn't have proper hands. Yet I could see everyone was practicing hard for this contest. Hearing about Team Ebony being champions also proved they must have figured out some way to participate. That did help with my confidence a bit. But then a certain something caught my eye. It was my Dotted Bow, a special ribbon that I wore around my wrist. I remember getting this when I first joined Wigglytuff's Guild.

But that wasn't the only item. Munchlax got a Catpaw Band, which she also wore around her wrist. Since we both received these items on the same day, both Munchlax and I interpreted them as symbols of our friendship. The two of us had been inseparable since we first met, having climbed the exploration rank to gold status. It was our teamwork that allowed us to save the world from paralysis. As long as we're sticking together, we can accomplish anything!

"Thanks, Shuppet," I spoke up with a smile. "Best of luck with the contest."

***

Soon it was time for the contest to begin. The eight teams all line up right outside Beach Cave's entrance, including myself and Munchlax. We had already discussed our plan for the contest, so we were all set.

"Okay, everyone!" Bellsprout announced. "Starting from this spot, you're free to roll your snowballs throughout all of Treasure Town and beyond. We have asked Pelippers to keep an eye out for updates and possible cheaters. Once time is up, they will inspect the completed snowballs."

I took a deep breath and prepared myself. Munchlax and I already went over the plan earlier. If I was right, this strategy would be perfect. I just needed to wait for the right cue. I glanced over at my trusted partner and we exchanged a brief nod. The race was going to start in three seconds.

"On your mark..."

Two seconds left. I dug my front paw into the snow.

"Get set..."

One second left. I crouched down in a ready-to-run position.

"GO!!!"

Ponyta and Camerupt breathed out small bursts of flame, kicking off the race. Everyone took off in different ways, but I had to run fast. Munchlax was moving at a fast pace as she gathered up snow, thinking about food like we planned a while ago. Luckily all this time exploring had prepared me for this, having gotten used to catching up to my hungry friend.

So with the Pelippers taking off, it was time to begin our plan of non-attack.

***

Our main stop for making a snowball was Treeshroud Forest, an area no one else was familiar with. It was just me, Munchlax, and the Pelipper who was following us from above. There was also another Pokémon who knew how to navigate this forest, but I shook those thoughts aside. Now was not the time to get distracted by sad memories, dang it!

I just had to keep a close eye on the snowball that was taking shape. My legs were starting to feel sore, but I had to keep going. If I lose track of where Munchlax was running, it'll be all over. No one could stop my partner whenever she got hungry, something that Chatot learned after our first dinner at the guild. So with our quick speed, we darted through the trees as the snowball kept getting bigger.

Just a few more roles until it was my turn to join in. So I kept waiting as I tried to keep up. Eventually, the snowball was the right size to support my weight.

"Now!" Munchlax called out.

"Right!" I replied just as quickly. "Quick Attack!" I darted on top of the snowball and ran on top of it as Munchlax continued to push. This was our master strategy. She would form the snowball until it got big enough for me to ride on. Then I would use Quick Attack to join in with making the snowball bigger.

At least, that was how the plan was supposed to go.

The two of us ended up in Deep Treeshroud Forest by the time our snowball was near completion. While looking ahead to make sure Munchlax steered at the right time, I just so happened to glance in a certain direction. What I saw was an empty space, right where a Time Gear...used...to...

***"The future of the world is up to you. Protect the sunrise, for everyone's sake."***

At that moment, everything seemed to slow down. My mind went back to my thoughts from earlier, how I had somehow come back after disappearing. But what about Grovyle and Celebi? What if they weren't so lucky? Munchlax and I might have changed the future, but at what cost? My old friends, forgotten memories be darned, are gone forever. I know it shouldn't bother me, but...

...Why was I crying?

I wasn't sure what happened next. One minute I was on top of a large snowball, the next I saw nothing but pure white. It all happened too fast. I think Munchlax was calling out to me a few seconds ago. And I wasn't running anymore. I had fallen over onto the ground in a pile of snow, right next to a tree. Was that pile our big snowball? And if so, did I cause a collision?

"Are you okay, Vulpix?" Munchlax checked.

I groaned in response. I wasn't sure why I ended up crashing our snowball into a tree. It must have been because I was distracted, thinking about my supposed former friends. I had to remind myself that it shouldn't bother me. I can't remember my old life as a human. I couldn't understand why thinking about Grovyle caused me to get distrac-

"Vulpix!" Munchlax yelped in alarm. She rushed over to my side. "Are you hurt?!"

"...No," I answered as I stood up. With a quick shake, I got rid of any snow that was on my body. "I'm fine."

"Then why are you crying?" Munchlax asked.

That confused me even more. "I'm crying?" I asked in response. But as if to answer my question, my vision blurred up again. But why? I shouldn't be feeling like this!

Munchlax could only look at me with a sadden expression. "You know, the last time we came here was with Grovyle," she said. "It was where we first collected a Time Gear to try and stop the world's paralysis."

"Because I know why we came here," Munchlax explained. "Not a lot of Pokemon come to Treeshroud Forest. You, me, and Grovyle are the only ones who know the path to this deeper area. It would be easier for us to make a big snowball without the other contestants interfering. But our first time coming out here was months ago."

That confused me. "...Months?" I repeated. "I thought we went to Temporal Tower weeks ago-" But then realization hit me, why stopping Primal Dialga felt so recent to me.

Did months pass after I disappeared?

Maybe that was why Munchlax didn't seem bothered by Grovyle's implied disappearance. And yet...

"I miss him," I realized.

"Miss who? Grovyle?" Munchlax asked.

I slowly nodded in response. "I can't remember my previous adventures with him, but I miss him," I explained. I let out a weak chuckle. "Strange, isn't it? Grovyle claims to be my trusted partner, even knew my human name, but all of my memories from that life are long gone. I shouldn't be upset over his apparent death, yet here I am, crying over him and Celebi."

"I don't think it's strange," Munchlax disagreed. "Grovyle was your partner when you were human. Memories or not, he must have left some impact on you, like how you knew about the Time Gear in Fogbound Lake when you first saw it."

"But I shouldn't be having these feelings after everything!" I clarified, unable to control my grief. "I'm the one so many Pokémon depend on, the one who puts on a smile to help others. I don't want those Pokémon to feel burdened by my own stress and struggles, not while they have their own issues to deal with." I felt my ears droop. "...I probably shouldn't have said that. Let's just get back to the contest before time's up-"

Suddenly, I was embraced by a familiar pair of dark teal arms. "Munchlax?" I asked in surprise.

"You shouldn't feel like a burden, Vulpix," Munchlax spoke as she slightly tightened her grasp. "It's okay for you to tell me how you really feel instead of bottling it all up. Besides, you're not exploring alone. You're one half of a duo, just like me." She finally released me from the hug. "I'm not just saying all this praise. I bet there's a ton of other Pokémon in Treasure Town who feel the same."

I could feel my ears perk up. "Like everyone at Wigglytuff's Guild?" I asked.

"Think bigger!" Munchlax cheerfully exclaimed as she stretched out her arms. "We also help town locals and even visitors. Just remember all the jobs we accepted from the bulletin and notice boards, Pokémon who visited Spinda's Cafe, and even a few stray bottles that get washed up on the beach."

I did just that. I thought about all the clients we helped out. It wasn't just Spoink who needed our help.

I did just that. I thought about all the clients we helped out. It wasn't just Spoink who needed our help. I ended up becoming friends with various other Pokémon who came from different towns. Glaceon, Squirtle, Eevee... There was even an artsy Pokemon from a different continent who went by the name 'Victini'. It was my kindness and willingness to help out that allowed me to meet those four and help them out when they needed it the most. It might be possible they saw that help as something truly special.

That was when I realized I wasn't alone anymore. Grovyle was gone, but I had made such a strong impact on everyone I met along the way. Those happy memories made me genuinely , especially with how much fun I had ever since I met Munchlax. So with newfound appreciation for my always-hungry friend, I used my nose to nudge a small pile of snow towards her.

"Thanks, Munchlax," I spoke out of gratitude. "I needed to hear that."

Munchlax smiled in response and picked up the small pile of snow, shaping it into a mini ball. "I don't think we can win at this point," she said. "So how about we try to gather as much snow as we can?"

"Sure," I answered. "But let's take things nice and slow this time."

***

Predictably, neither of us won the contest. Spoink ended up beating Team Ebony and became the new snowball-making champion thanks to his psychic powers.

Shuppet and Murkrow came in second place, while the third place winners were Aunty Kangaskhan and her child. But after the Pelipper who was monitoring me and Munchlax explained what happened at Treeshroud Forest, Team Munchpix got an honorable mention for outstanding teamwork.

Afterwards, we all went to Spinda's Cafe for a celebratory meal. But when we arrived, I was surprised by the change of scenery. Red garland was hanging from the ceiling and unfamiliar music was playing from the cafe's jukebox. If that wasn't enough, Spinda wore a red coat trimmed with white fur and one of his ears was covered with a matching hat. Wynaut and Wobbuffet both wore green-pointed hats, with Wobbuffet wearing a matching green dress and a black belt. The whole atmosphere felt so different than before, with the locals being more festive and cheerful.

After everyone was seated, I took a look at the menu. While we still had the option to pick out whatever type of drink we wanted after providing an ingredient, there were a few beverages I didn't recognize. Egg nog, apple cider, hot chocolate... What were these drinks doing on the menu? Thankfully my partner wasn't confused.

"Oh boy! Look at all these winter-themed drinks!" Munchlax gushed. "Good thing I brought a bunch of White Gummis!"

"'Winter-themed drinks'?" I echoed in confusion. "Is this also part of the whole tradition thing?"

"Yep!" Munchlax confirmed with a nod. "They're all super-tasty to drink during this time of year, especially hot chocolate."

She smiled wide. "Ooooh, what if the gummis are shaped like marshmallows?"

"Only one way to find out!" Spinda replied as he wobbled over to us. "Welcome to the fresh and friendly Spinda's Cafe! What would you like to order?"

Munchlax slammed a huge bag of White Gummis onto the table. "Think you can make hot chocolate with these?" she asked in response.

"Oh..." Spinda muttered in a nervous sweat. "Hungry as usual, I see..." He quickly regained his composure and looked over at me. "And what would you like?"

I wasn't quite sure what I should have. As I looked at the menu, I could tell all of these drinks must taste delicious. Since I was so new to the wintertime season, I figured I should trust Munchlax's judgment and order the same drink. So I took out a Red Gummi from my bag with my mouth and dropped it onto the table.

"I'll take a hot chocolate as well," I answered, nudging the gummi closer to the dizzying barista.

"Very well," Spinda replied. He took my one Red Gummi and Munchlax's bag of White Gummis. "Your drinks will be prepared in a few minutes."

Of course, there was a reason why there was a longer wait than usual. Spinda had to take the orders of all the contest participants and judges.

Once that was done, he got behind his juice bar and went to work by shaking and stirring each drink. Afterwards, he proceeded to go to each table and delivered each order. But by the time he arrived at where me and Munchlax sat, he had a massive tray full of mugs containing what appeared to be this hot chocolate. While most of the drinks had a White Gummi floating in each mug, only one contained a Red Gummi instead.

"Here are your mugs of hot chocolate," Spinda said as he placed the tray on the table. "Enjoy!" He wobbled off, presumably to serve more drinks to customers.

Munchlax was quick to start gulping down mug after mug of White Gummi hot chocolate. But as for me, I looked at my own mug of Red Gummi hot chocolate out of curiosity. It looked like some kind of dark brown liquid. But it smelled good and Munchlax seemed super-happy to drink it, so I leaned close to my mug and took a single lick-

"IRK!" I yelped as my head jerked backwards. It was so hot, even for someone like me! Should I wait for it to cool down?

At that moment, Munchlax paused her drink marathon and noticed my discomfort. "Hey, don't let it get cold," she said. "It tastes better hot." Then she resumed drinking her hot chocolate.

Well, if that was what hot chocolate was supposed to taste like, I carefully took a few more licks. Aside from the hot feeling on my tongue, it was surprisingly delicious.

The added Red Gummi gave it a little bit of a spicy kick that I was more accustomed to, which tasted familiar. I was sure Munchlax was tasting whatever flavor she liked in White Gummis in her mugs.

So as we enjoyed our hot chocolate and enjoyed the cafe's festive setting, I felt a little more at ease with snowfalls at Treasure Town. Munchlax seemed to indicate wearing colorful scarves, taking part in a snowball making contest, and drinking special beverages seemed to be something the local residents do every year. Sure it all felt a little strange for an outsider like me, but honestly, I was having a lot of fun. I wouldn't mind doing this again for next year's snowfall, especially with having my trusted partner and closest friend by my side.

"Wintertime in Treasure Town"

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HEY!

XMAS

YOU'RE JUST GONNA HAVE TO BE PATIENT!

MUNCH...

THERE'S STILL A FEW MORE TO DECORATE, PLUS THEY GOTTA-

BLAH BLAH BLAH BLA

?!

-THEN WE CAN SAMPLE THEM!

NYA...!

OH FOR THE LOVE OF MEW.

ZOOM!

NYA...

UndeadSwine @ Instagram•Twitter

AMALTHEA! MUFFIN! GET BACK HERE!

YEESH, HOW ARE YOU GUYS FASTER THAN PIKI?

OKAY, C'MON NOW, HAND 'EM OVER-

OH! HUH.

THAT IS...VERY SWEET OF YOU TWO.

?

SNOW~

AND VERY IN THE HOLIDAY SPIRIT.

BUT IF YOU *LISTENED*, I WAS SAYING WE'D SHARE THEM ONCE THE ICING SET!

Munch...

TIME TO GET ONES NOT COVERED IN YOUR FUR I GUESS...

UndeadSwine @ Instagram•Twitter

Valyce Negative @ Valycenegative.it•Bsky.app

PFFT

Dawn @ Twitter.com/milkbread_yk

dyed-indigo @ Tumblr

# All About Focus

The Abomasnow slams her Weavile into the ground, and Candice flinches at the force behind the hit. Both trainers are on their final Pokémon. She's closer to winning than ever before— can't lose focus now.

She doesn't look at the other end of the battlefield. She keeps her eyes on the last place she saw her own Pokémon. It might be over. But it might not be.

A blue-black blur darts backwards. Her heart soars.

"Avalanche!" Candice shouts, hoping desperately that this gamble will pay off.

Her Weavile snarls, summoning snow into the air. There's a loud screech, as the avalanche solidifies, before it crashes down upon the Abomasnow. Candice holds her breath. If that was enough, then she's won— but her Weavile can't take another hit like that.

The Abomasnow stands, sways... and, with a crash that sends more snow flying into the air, topples backwards. Candice scarcely breathes as she looks at her opponent, her mentor, the current Gym Leader of Snowpoint City.

He's smiling warmly at her. Ironic, considering the type both specialize in.

"Look at you go, Candice!" Wulfric recalls his Abomasnow, his grin somehow widening as he starts clapping. "You've come so far."

Candice ducks her head, somewhat embarrassed, as her Weavile prances over to stand beside her. "Thank you, sir! I couldn't have done it alone!"

"Of course you're not alone. You have your Pokémon!"

She nods, holding out a hand for a high-five. Her Weavile has three claws, not five, but meets her hand with a loud purr anyway.

"Icy and my other Pokémon too, of course," Candice says warmly. "She's really grown into her evolution. But I don't— I couldn't— "

"Take your time," Wulfric says.

She doesn't ask, *Do you really have to go to Kalos?*

"I wouldn't be anywhere near as strong as I am now without your help," she settles on instead. "Thank you."

Wulfric nods, crossing the battlefield to join her. There's a hand on her shoulder.

"Helping others become stronger is as much being a good Gym Leader as being strong yourself," Wulfric says gently. "I know you'll make a good one, when the time comes."

She doesn't say how she wishes that time wouldn't come so soon. She's not sure she can around the lump in her throat.

Instead, she smiles and nods, and hopes that he doesn't notice the tears in her eyes. For better or for worse, he doesn't see a thing.

***

For as long as Candice can remember, Wulfric has been the Gym Leader here in Snowpoint. As far as Gym Leaders go, he's a great one. Whatever level trainers are at, he'll meet them there, testing and encouraging them whether they win or lose.

Honestly, Candice would have expected that from any Gym Leader. Given what she's hearing from the newly-appointed one from Veilstone, Candice is starting to realize that some care more about their own egos than helping others.

"I can't do worse than my predecessor," Maylene mumbles, staring out at the snow. "Everyone keeps telling me that, and they're probably right, but... they're setting the bar really low. He was—"

"Terrible," Candice says, because she's heard about Maylene's predecessor from Wulfric. When she went around on the gym circuit herself, she didn't have any problems with the Veilstone Gym, but... she's wondering if the old leader knew she was Wulfric's apprentice. If Candice caught wind of anything amiss, it would have gone straight back to Wulfric— and to the Pokémon League itself from there.

She remembers, slightly late, who Maylene's predecessor was to her. "Sorry."

"Don't be," her friend says bitterly. "You're right."

Maylene falls silent after that. Candice doesn't know what to say. She wants to encourage Maylene, she wants to take her hands in her own and look her in the eyes and promise her that she'll do *amazing*, she wants to hold her tight and never let go. She wants to do a lot of things, but if she doesn't focus on one thing at a time she'll never get *anything* done.

"Of course you'll be better than him," Candice says at last. "But you'll be way better than *that*, too."

"Will I?" Maylene asks, fiddling with the bandaid on her arm like she can't decide whether to rip it off or leave it. "You've seen me battle, am I really strong enough?"

Candice nods. "You are. But being a good Gym Leader isn't just about strength. It's about *focus*, too, and you're great at that! You'll be fine."

Leaving the bandaid as is, Maylene sighs, pulling her legs up to her chest to hug them there. She's barefoot, despite the snow, which is... honestly, a step further than even Candice is willing to go, and she trains with Ice-types. Still, Maylene doesn't *seem* to be shivering, so... it's probably fine?

(If it's not fine, it isn't as if Candice needs her own jacket.)

"I really want to believe you," Maylene says, voice shaky. "So I will. Thanks."

"Anytime." Candice grins at her. Maybe, just maybe, if she can line up the words in a way that will make sense to both her and Maylene, maybe then—

"Wulfric's still moving to Kalos soon, right?" Maylene asks, as if any mention of *Wulfric* and *Kalos* in the same sentence won't immediately send Candice's train of thought flying off the rails.

Her shoulders slump. "It's not as if I don't get why. They suddenly have a vacancy, Wulfric's already got family there, and his wife can get a better job... it's better all around, really."

"You sound miserable," Maylene observes. "When is he leaving?"

Candice breathes in sharply. If she focuses intently enough on a recently-disturbed patch of snow somewhere off in the distance, maybe she won't have to think too hard about the day she's been dreading, the day she's been counting down to.

"The end of winter," she says quietly. "He said he could stay longer if I needed him. And I *do,* but at the same time, I don't want him to leave at all, and asking him to stay longer would make it hurt more."

"I think I get it." Maylene scoots a bit closer, and suddenly Candice's entire brain feels like it's been hit with a high-level Thunder as Maylene wraps an arm around her shoulders. "Sorry. Is this... okay?"

"Yeah," Candice basically squeaks. "It's okay."

"Great. You sounded like you needed a hug." And yes, alright, she's not wrong— Candice really could use a hug— but her big problem (impending mentor departure) has just been overshadowed by the temporarily bigger problem (Maylene doing the hugging.) "I don't really... I didn't have someone like that— you *know* how my dad is— but if he didn't suck and he was leaving..."

Candice nods numbly. "Barely remember my parents. Wulfric's the closest thing I've got to one, and even then he's more of a cool— haha, *cool!*— uncle. In theory, I'm a competent adult, we're both competent adults, we should be fine! In practice..."

"In practice," Maylene whispers, "adulting is scary."

"It really is," Candice says, and wonders how competent adults ask out people they're attracted to. Surely they don't stew in their feelings until they feel like they'll explode anytime they're around the person in question.

Surely they don't promise themselves that this time they'll say something... and then offer their crush their jacket instead of saying anything better.

(Naturally, that's what happens with Maylene. At least she takes the jacket, though Candice has a feeling that it's going to see as much use as it would from Candice herself.)

***

Wulfric isn't actually at home when Candice goes knocking on his door for advice. Trisha, his wife, clarifies that he's out helping a kid catch their first Pokémon and likely will be for a while, but invites her in for hot cocoa anyway. Candice would do some very inadvisable things for hot cocoa, so really, it's not *if* she'll end up asking Trisha for advice so much as *when.*

"I do have bad news for you, if you're expecting us to be competent adults because we're older," Trisha says, after Candice has explained herself.

"I didn't meet Wulfric until my twenties, and... oh, we must have danced around each other for years before either of us said anything!"

Oh, okay, so Candice is screwed. She takes a bigger gulp of hot cocoa than she should to cope, wincing as it goes down hotter than it should. Hopefully she didn't burn her mouth, or if she did, hopefully not too badly.

Ow.

"But one of you made a move eventually, right?" Candice says hopefully.

"Eventually," Trisha allows. "We'd started spending more time together, and one day— he'd only just taken over the gym then, you understand— he needed a plus one to a League event, and since I was free, he asked me! Quite a few people at the event assumed we were together, though, and it got to the point where I eventually just blurted out that we weren't dating, though I certainly wouldn't mind if we were, and... one thing led to another, from there."

"One thing led to another," Candice says wryly, "and now you're married with kids."

"It didn't exactly happen fast. I suspect you hadn't even been born when our friendship turned into something else."

Trisha's Snom starts to approach her mug curiously, and Candice really can't bring herself to shoo him away. She reaches out a hand to pet him instead. He seems to appreciate this.

"So... I shouldn't really expect anything to happen *fast* here either," Candice says after a few moments. "I can't invite Maylene to a League event with me, she's already a Gym Leader! And—"

She will be one soon, yet she can't quite force those words out of her mouth. The Snom *chrrs* in unmistakable concern.

"Are you feeling alright, Candice?" Trisha asks. "Girl troubles aside, I know Wulfric has been worried about you."

*No. You're moving to Kalos, and I should be happy for you and happy that I'm getting the Gym, but instead all I can think of is how much I'll be losing.*

"I'm a little tired." Candice grins. "Nothing that can't be overcome with more focus!"

"Well... make sure you're getting enough sleep, alright?"

Trisha seems to buy that. Her Snom doesn't, if the way he migrates to Candice's lap is any indication. Last she checked, he couldn't tell anyone except other Pokémon. She can live with that.

***

There are many ways for a leader to train their successor. Candice has spent a lot of time shadowing Wulfric, but that's far the only way she's preparing.

He's still the Gym Leader of Snowpoint, after all, until the winter formally ends and the temperature up in Snowpoint barely changes.

He’s still challenged on occasion by hopefuls with their sights set on the Championship, and while it's not required to have a referee for gym matches, the new Champion has strongly encouraged the practice.

Acting as a referee helps make Candice a better trainer, too. She has to watch both sides, call a round when Pokémon are unable to battle, and keep quiet when she sees something smarter that either trainer could have done. That last part is harder than she expected, though she knows that it's easy to miss things when she's the one battling.

It's all about focus— most things in her life are. If she doesn't call matches in time, someone could get seriously hurt. That's the last thing anyone wants, so focus she does.

This challenger came to Snowpoint for her final gym. Wulfric's down to his Abomasnow, while the challenger has only a Gengar. It could go either way, at this point, depending on the Gengar's moveset.

"Fire Punch!" the challenger calls out, adjusting her glasses with a cocky smile. And— *oh,* Wulfric might have just lost this one. Candice eyes the Abomasnow carefully. Will her mentor's ace Pokémon stay standing and attack again?

The Abomasnow *stumbles,* catching itself with a massive hand, but doesn't fall. Not quite.

Candice watches carefully, unwilling to call it yet, as Wulfric calls out, "Sheer Cold!"

*Oh,* that's a gamble— and would be off the table for anything short of an eight-badge match.

If it hits, this is over in one fell swoop. If it doesn't, the challenger’s won.

She focuses on the battle.

The move hits. The Gengar crumples. Candice waits with bated breath— maybe the Gengar has powered through— but not for long. "The challenger’s Gengar is unable to battle!" Candice calls out. "Leader Wulfric is the victor!"

"Oh, well. Next time, then." The challenger returns her Gengar with a sigh.

"I look forward to seeing you then," Wulfric says.

He says other things, too, because Wulfric is great at encouraging people. It's one of the things Candice admires most about him— one of *several* things she’s terrified that she'll never replicate herself when the time comes.

The clock is ticking. No amount of focus can change that.

***

Snowpoint’s Pokémon Center doesn't get much traffic. Apart from locals and the odd traveling trainer, it's rarely ever crowded even around dusk, when the temperature promises to dive overnight and people take advantage of the last light they'll have until the following dawn to get their Pokémon healed up.

Candice is one such person, getting her Abomasnow patched up from a rough battle when she hears a familiar voice exclaim, "Oh! Good, you're here!"

She knows that voice. It's hard not to know the voice of someone who's been showing up with alarming frequency in Candice's dreams of late.

Maybe she has it worse than she thought. Which is a problem, because Maylene is right there and Candice can feel her focus slipping away from her as she fumbles for something to say.

"...Candice?"

She turns, smiling nervously on instinct. "Maylene! It's great to see you, it's always great to see you, but I didn't expect— what are you doing here?"

"Bringing back your jacket," Maylene says, shrugging off the backpack she's wearing as she kneels to open it. "I don't really do jackets, honestly, but— oh."

"What is it?" Candice says nervously.

"I forgot your jacket." Maylene sighs. "Sorry. I thought that I shoved it in here this morning, and then I was super busy all day and didn't have a chance to check that it was your jacket and not my change of clothes... I'm really sorry, I can head back and grab it—"

"At this time of day?" Candice eyes the outside window, recalls the weather forecast.

"No way. I don't need my jacket that much, and there's a blizzard coming after sundown. I wouldn't go out in that, and I train with Ice-types. You don't."

Maylene shrugs. "I mean, most of my family has had freakishly high cold tolerance since like... my great-great grandmother? They all thought she was weird, too. Pretty sure she had a Glaceon."

"Yeah. Alright." Candice breathes in, breathes out, and tries to think of how to explain the dangers of a *blizzard* to someone who isn't a Snowpoint native.

Fortunately, she doesn't have to. The nurse at the countertop clears her throat and says, "Excuse me? If I may interrupt— oh, Candice, your Pokémon are ready!"

"Thanks," Candice says nervously. She doesn't move.

"Anyway—" The nurse on duty looks to Maylene. "The cold isn't even the worst danger where blizzards are concerned. It's all too easy to get lost in one, particularly after dark. Worse, while the Snowpoint Pokémon Center does keep its doors open at all hours, we tend to get snowed in. Should you or your Pokémon be hurt out there in the storm, you wouldn't be able to get to us in time."

"Oh," Maylene says very quietly. And then, again, *"Oh."*

"Of course," the nurse continues, "you're as welcome to spend the night in this Pokémon Center as any trainer would be in others. The storm should have passed by tomorrow morning—"

"Of course," the nurse continues, "you're as welcome to spend the night in this Pokémon Center as any trainer would be in others. The storm should have passed by tomorrow morning—"

"Oh," Maylene says a third time. She looks almost... disappointed.

In what is either a brilliant or completely misguided moment of word association, Candice opens her mouth and blurts out, "You could stay at my place, too! If you want."

"You two know each other?" the nurse asks, a single eyebrow raised.

Candice nods, before her brain can catch up to her heart. "I have hot cocoa. My Weavile's a cuddler."

"Is she?" Maylene absolutely *lights up.* "So's my Medicham. I love hot cocoa."

"Great," Candice says, heart pounding. "Um. Do you want to...?"

***

Candice rides the high of having successfully invited Maylene back to her house until she reaches the front door and it fully registers for her that Maylene is going to be *in her house.* Then she freezes with her key in the lock.

"...Candice?" Maylene asks. "Are you okay?"

"Fine!" Candice says immediately.

The metal of her key is freezing against her fingers. She can focus on that, upon it turning and the door opening and herself getting inside. It's too late to take back the invitation now. Terrifying as it is, she wouldn't want to.

"Make yourself at home," she says with a nod towards the couch, trying to focus on making hot cocoa and getting the fire started. "I don't know how much longer I'll be living here— the leader's supposed to live in an apartment behind the gym, Wulfric and his family always made it work, and so I guess I'll be living there too?"

"They've got one of those behind the Veilstone Gym, too. Grew up there." Maylene shrugs when Candice risks a glance in her direction. "Still living there now that I'm in charge, but that's less because I want to and more because I don't have anywhere else to go, you know?"

That's a rhetorical question, it's got to be, but Candice does know. She doesn't remember her parents well anymore, but they had been happy here before the accident that left her alone. She hadn't known where she would go or what she would do then. All she'd had was her Sneasel, just as lost and confused as she was.

Wulfric stepped in to help her out, of course, because that's what a good Gym Leader is *supposed* to do when tragedy strikes and your community is left to pick up the pieces. He'd encouraged her to keep learning, let her hang around the gym when the loneliness got to be too much, inspired her to specialize and follow in his footsteps.

Accidents happen all the time. Most of them aren't that extreme, and some of them might turn out heartbreakingly preventable in retrospect— but they do happen. It'll be Candice's duty to be what Wulfric was for others.

(She hopes that no one else will ever need her the way she needed Wulfric.)

"Yeah." Candice's voice cracks unexpectedly. "I know. Maybe I won't move, then."

"I mean, obviously you can! If you want to! ...Do you want to?"

No, she doesn't. She hadn't considered the possibility that she didn't have to until now.

"Moving would mean figuring out how to sell a house, and finding someone to buy a house up here in the first place, and other adulting stuff I'm happy to put off for longer." Candice picks up two mugs, blue and pink, and joins Maylene on the couch. "Look, just because I'm theoretically grown up doesn't mean I want to rush all that!"

"Mood." Maylene snorts, gratefully taking the pink one— then looks at it and perks up. "Oh! You got marshmallows!"

"Is hot cocoa really complete without them?" To be fair, Trisha makes good hot cocoa without marshmallows, but Candice has more of a sweet tooth and has always liked how they look like little icebergs floating in a sea of warm brown deliciousness.

...Fortunately, it's looking like Maylene has a sweet tooth too. In retrospect, she should have asked first. But—

"It's still good, but I like it better this way." Maylene sips at her cocoa cautiously, then pauses, simply breathing the scent in.

Candice can only watch, grateful that she's already sitting down. She's even more smitten than she thought. That's certainly a realization to have when she's sitting next to Maylene, on her couch, in her house, in *her city*. But it's fine! Better to have that now when she can act on it.

She just has to say something. Worst case scenario, Maylene doesn't feel the same, they laugh it off, and things are a little awkward for a while but they're hopefully still friends! Hopefully. Best case scenario...

She doesn't want to get her hopes too high. She just has to focus and articulate the mess of feelings in a girl-shaped suit called Candice. One way or another, it will be fine. She has all night.

***

Maylene heads home the next morning with a promise to actually return Candice's jacket the next time she visits and absolutely no idea that Candice is hopelessly in love with her. In Candice's defense, she'd made the mistake of bringing up Maylene's first day as Gym Leader. By the time they were done talking about that, Candice could scarcely keep her eyes open and it definitely wasn't the right time.

(She dreamed of holding hands, of watching the snow fall together. Unfortunately, it was only a dream, though Candice could almost feel Maylene's hand in hers for a few moments after blinking awake alone on the couch.)

***

"You know," Wulfric says one day, "you're more ready than you think you are."

Candice, who had only just arrived at the gym a few minutes ago, chokes on her hot cocoa. "I'm flattered that you think that! But—"

"You *are,"* he continues, once he's more certain she isn't about to choke to death right in front of him. "But you're never going to realize that if you don't get more practice on your own. So, I spoke with the Champion, and she gave me special permission to have you take over today."

It's a good thing that Candice stopped trying to drink more coca. "She— what?"

He offers her a warm smile. "You'll stand where I would, use the gym 'mons, and exercise your own discretion for giving out badges if it comes down to that."

Her heart sinks. "But—"

"I'll be right there beside you," Wulfric promises. "If you need me. But if you don't, pretend I'm not there."

***

Candice's first day as a Gym Leader, albeit unofficially, goes... fine? The Snowpoint Gym gets a weird amount of traffic, given the weather— it must be starting to warm up in the rest of Sinnoh. And, while she can't keep herself from looking to Wulfric for the first couple of challengers, by the final one she almost has forgotten that he's there.

The final challenger is the girl with the Gengar. She almost beats Candice outright— the battle concludes in a double knockout, a rare situation where granting or withholding a badge is entirely up to the leader's discretion.

She does not look at Wulfric. She thinks back to how hard this trainer and her Pokémon have been working, how she keeps coming back and doesn't switch out any of her Pokémon for others better suited against Ice-types, because they're *her* Pokémon. Because she cares about them and they care about her.

Candice takes a deep breath, walks forward, and holds out a hand for the challenger to shake. She does so, albeit warily.

When she steps back, Wulfric's badge is in her hand. It might be Candice's badge too, soon, or she might pick a new design for herself.

"You fought very well," Candice says. "If either of us made slightly different calls, it could have ended in your victory. Good luck at the League!"

The challenger looks like she's about to cry. She nods, chokes out something approaching a thanks, and makes herself scarce.

Candice hesitates.

"Was that okay?" she asks, looking over her shoulder to where Wulfric still stands.

"More than okay," Wulfric says proudly. "That was a good call— but, more importantly, you made it without waiting for my approval."

"I did do that." Candice gulps. Looks down. And finds the strength to admit, at last, "I... wish you weren't going to Kalos. I wish I didn't have to be ready."

"You'll be alright." He's smiling reassuringly as he walks towards her. "You know what you're doing. I have nothing left to teach you, Candice."

"I know." She can't stop now. "It's not even about that. You're like family to me, the only family I have left, and..."

"Now I'm leaving you, too." Wulfric sighs, pulling her into a hug. "I thought that might be it... Candice, you *will* be alright on your own. But you're always welcome to visit me in Kalos, and I'm sure this won't be the last I'll see of Sinnoh— and if you *do* need me, for anything at all, I'll be a call away."

"Right," Candice says weakly. There are the tears she was too focused to notice. "Thank you. For *everything.*"

She doesn't want to stop hugging him, because his flight is soon. The snow's melting, as much as it ever does around here. Winter is coming to an end, and it's time for a new chapter in both of their lives... but, however selfish it may be, Candice wishes this could last just a little while longer.

But someone clears their throat behind her. Did the challenger return?

"Um," says a voice that isn't the challenger, "I'm sorry— am I interrupting something? I can come back."

Candice pulls away, wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her shirt, and sees Maylene standing there, Candice's jacket tied around her waist.

"Hello, Maylene," Wulfric says. "Is everything alright?"

"Yeah! Everything's great. I needed to return Candice's jacket." She beams at Candice. "And... maybe we could train together? Later?"

"Are you sure you don't want Wulfric?" Candice all but squeaks. "He's the leader here still, and he's way better at... a lot of things... than me!"

"Don't sell yourself short," Wulfric says, patting her on the shoulder. "I've more experience, and besides... I don't think it's just about the training."

"What?"

"Because I think you're cool, and... I'd like to spend more time with you!" Maylene can't seem to meet her eyes, until suddenly she does. "Are you free later?"

"Yes?" She looks tp Wulfric, who nods. "Yes, I am—"

"Great! Meet me at the Pokémon Center in... is an hour good?"

"Probably?"

Maylene nods, dashing back out. She still has Candice's jacket.

Candice can't help but stare at the door. "Am I... missing something?"

"Oh, young love," Wulfric says. "Now, I can't be *sure,* but it looks to me like you have yourself a date."

Oh. *Oh.*

Seeing the look on her face, he chuckles. "I think you'll be fine."

"The vote of confidence is appreciated," Candice says weakly. "Maybe I will be."

***

Snow falls, though not heavily enough to obscure the plane taking off with Wulfric and the rest of his family on it, the plane bound for Kalos.

Candice watches it go, holding her girlfriend's hand all the tighter.

## "All About Focus"

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ZZZZ
ZZZZZ
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beavertails & hot chocolate

maple taffy! very yummy

pretty ice rink :)

bonhomme de neige!

carnaval de québec

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# A Sweet Surprise

Cakes were typically used to lure Pokémon, but that doesn't mean they lose the taste for their favorite treats.

Adaman knew that Leafeon enjoyed salt cakes, often trying to steal them whenever he bought them for other clan members. Vaporeon and Umbreon enjoyed the grain cakes, although Umbreon also liked mushroom cakes. Adaman indulged his team every once and a while. Sneaking them cakes if he had any extras, but those instances were rare. So with St. Nick's Day coming up, he knew exactly how to celebrate it.

St. Nick's day, despite being the celebration of an important figure, was soon turns into a gift giving holiday. Many kids left their shoes out so that parents could fill them with various treats over night. Adaman encountered many kids in the Diamond clan clamoring about the different treats they'd gotten. He often watched fondly as they compared and boasted about their prize.

This year Adaman got the idea to include his Pokémon team. It wasn't like he had any kids to celebrate with and he knew not to take away from the parents enjoyment by providing gifts to every kid. He'd kept gifts on him as a just in case but only handed them out if a kid came up to him. It was best not to provide them too many sweets.

With his mind set on his plans, Adaman had made his way towards his house. He stopped along the way to collect various berries, making a stop at the store as well to grab any ingredients for the cakes that he still needed. While at the store, he realized that he didn't know how he would be able to bake the cakes for his team without them knowing. Of course, there was also the fact that he was absolutely horrible at making things so in the end he had decided to just purchase some ready made cakes.

When Adaman got home, he was quick to stash away the cakes. He hoped that Vaporeon, Umbreon, and Leafeon didn't find them before he had a chance to wrap them. So he carefully placed them into a storage container and surrounded them with various other items, some that would hopefully cover the scent of the cakes.

Time passed and luckily none of the Pokémon  seemed to have uncovered Adaman's little secret. It likely helped that he did take them all outside for a lot of the day for training and some play time. Letting the three run around and enjoy the weather. When it was finally time to head back inside, the Pokémon  all seemed to have worn themselves out. Adaman watched as they moved to curl up together and fall asleep rather quickly.

Not long after the three Pokémon  fell asleep, Adaman joined them in Dreamland . Luckily for him, Adaman had woken up before his team. Making sure to stay quiet, he moved to grab the cakes and berries. Carefully wrapping them in little gifts. Wrapping cloth around them in a makeshift bag. He had noticed that he might've bought more then he needed, but figured that his team might enjoy the extras if they wanted to. The more the merrier.

The time had finally come to give out his little gifts to his team. He watched as Leafeon, Vaporeon and Umbreon had all slowly woke up from their little corner of the house. Adaman smiled softly as he noticed that all three Pokémon  still seemed sleepy, watching as they all yawned and stretched. Leafeon had spotted the little gift bags first. Trilling softly as her head tilled to the side, looking at him curiously. She had led the other two over towards where he stood by the little table he had.

With a soft hum, Adaman grabbed the gifts and crouched down. He opened one in front of Vaporeon and Umbreon, smiling at the sound of Vaporeon's happy cry at the sight of the various berries and cakes. Happily moving to dig in while Umbreon was a bit more subtle with his excitement. He didn't miss the dark Pokémon's tail wagging as it tasted some of the treats. Moving to open another little gift bag for Leafeon, he watched happily as she moved to taste the cakes. A pleased rubble came from the Pokémon  and Adaman smiled as he reached out to pet her.

The group stayed there in content silence until the treats were gone. The only sound that filled the house were the sounds of his team eating at the cakes and berries. Adaman sat with his team, watching happily as they ate their fill. He had a few treats left and figured that he could give them out to others around the clan.

After the gift giving between his team and the celebrations among the clans, Adaman found himself heading towards the Pearl clan. After everything that had happened between the clans, Irida was usually the last person that Adaman would be thinking of. But he was in the gift giving spirit and knew the other clan leader had a certain soft spot for the eevee evolutions just as he did and he had a few extra treats on him anyways.

Many clan members stared as he made his way through to find Irida, but he paid them no mind. The Pearl clan area was a place he didn't often visit, not like he really needed to anyways with the tensions between the two clans. But the settlement was set in the colder area of Hisui and he preferred the warmer climates. How Irida managed to stand the cold, Adaman never knew.

Irida was found relatively quick. The other clan leader seemed shocked at the sight of Adaman walking through her settlement. Although that shock turned into irritation and he knew that she was probably assuming that he was there to argue or complain about something the Pearl clan had done. Adaman held up his hands to show that he was there peacefully, smile on his face as he finally got close to Irida.

“I’m not here to be mean. I was just feeling generous.” he explained, before he was reaching towards the pack he’d brought and took out the Pokémon  treats. “This is for your team. I had some extras and thought your pokémon might like them.”

Irida blinked at the cakes and berries in surprise. She stared for only a moment before accepting the treats with a muttered thanks. Irida was then calling out her team and passing out the various cakes and berries. The two watched as Glaceon, Flareon, and Espeon ate the treats they received happily. At that moment Adaman was glad that both clan leaders had a soft spot for Eevee and its evolutions. It made gift giving so much easier no matter how unexpected the idea was.

“So how is the Pearl clan doing?” Adaman asked, anything to clear the slight awkwardness that still hung in the air.

Irida only flashed a slightly confused look in Adaman’s direction before she responded. “Everyone is doing alright. They’re all enjoying the holidays coming up. What about the Diamond clan?” she asked.

“Same as you. Kids are getting excited and parents are losing their minds.” Adaman replied with a soft chuckle.

From there the two chatted about their respective clans, updating the other about what was going on without bringing up the tension between the two clans. It was nice to talk with Irida normally and it was even better to be able to connect with a fellow clan leader. If there wasn’t the tension between the two clans, then Adaman found that he would’ve really enjoyed Irida’s company. She knew what it was like to be a clan leader and could empathize with his struggles just as he could empathize with hers. Maybe it was finally time to put the clan feuds to rest.

At least for the holidays.

"A Sweet Surprise"

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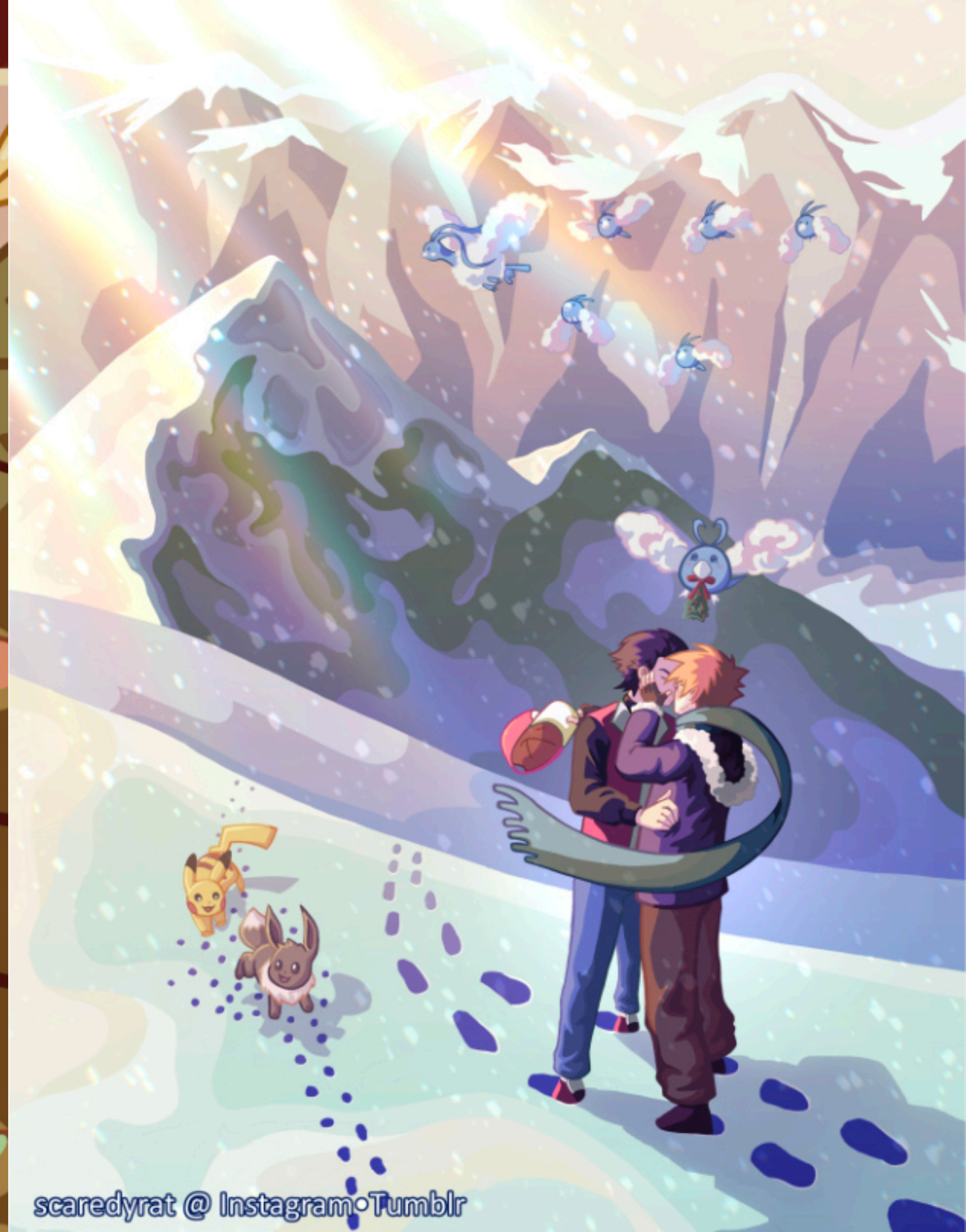
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# Hearth

Oddish is pretty sure that the cold will freeze his leaves right off.

It isn't so much that he has never experienced the cold. Winter isn't new to him. He used to spend the frigid months huddled with his siblings, burrowed into the ground. A little bit of hibernation. Sluggish days with a sluggish mind, nestled into the soft loam.

He could do the same now, but—

Oddish tilts left, looking at the edge of the greenhouse. *Ramos.* No, no, he can't leave him be. Ramos is an old man, hunkered over, and with swollen joints. And even if he is strangely spry, he'll work an entire day and then complain that his back hurts the next morning.

Besides, Oddish has come to love sitting by the fireplace inside Ramos's home, something most of the Pokémon on the ranch don't get to enjoy. Perks of being tiny. Cute as a button. Rotund and prone to freezing solid, if given the chance.

"Just lookin' out fer ya," said Ramos the first time he brought him inside.

It is colder this year. Snow has already fallen, coating the ground. Oddish smells the strange wind that blows in from the ocean and feels the change in the weather in his leaves. More snow. A *blizzard,* Ramos calls it.

"There ya are, 'lil guy." Ramos crouches to the ground on creaking joints and pets Oddish's leaves. Even in the greenhouse, it is chilly, so his palm warms Oddish down to his feet. "A bit nippy, eh? Let's get ye inside."

Ramos stands, groaning slightly and rubbing at his back. "A storm," he mutters, once outside, locking the greenhouse door behind him. Gray clouds roll in from the ocean with a crisp salt tang to the air. Ramos looks down at Oddish, his wrinkled face amused. "Well, I guess that just means you'll be inside for a while, hm? Come on."

Oddish blinks, his mouth falling open. *Inside.* Warmth and good food.

Well, there are worse places to spend the cold, right?

***

Four consecutive days spent inside Ramos's home has Oddish rethinking.

It's a little *too* warm. Yes, Oddish likes the fire, even if it was a little scary at first. Yes, Oddish enjoys the foods and treats, particularly the sweet things that old Missus Ramos sneaks at him when her husband isn't looking. She always winks and laughs, petting his leaves, and cooing at how cute he is.

Reminds him of Ma. Oddish misses Ma— but he enjoys his new family nearly as much. But the grandchildren... Oddish winces as one tugs at his leaves a little too harshly.

"Quit that," says Ramos from his armchair. "Leave the 'lil sprout alone."

Another tug against his leaf before the child lets go with a huff. And then they toddle off, lured away by Miss Ramos's promises of dessert. Ramos laughs, leans over, and ruffles his leaves gently.

"Still cold outside. That blizzard'll be razing for a bit. I feel it in my bones." Ramos laughs, warm and hearty. The fireplace casts an orange glow on his face, and Oddish feels his chest swell.

He loves it here. Didn't think that he would, but ever since Ramos plucked him from near death after a Noctowl dug in its claws, Oddish has decided he'd rather be nowhere else. Still. It's cold. Bitterly so. Oddish knows if he steps outside crusty little flakes would cling to his leaves.

Ramos regards him with a warm smile. "Come're 'lil sprout."

Oddish does, toddling across the wooden floor. Ramos grunts as he lifts him into his lap. "Hm, the tips are dry," he murmurs, thumbing over the edges of Oddish's leaves. "Nothing a 'lil good food and a potion can't take care of."

***

Oddish doesn't know what *Yuletide* is, but he knows that he likes the festivities.

Ramos's home is full of family, kind and warmhearted people who like to pet his head and whisper sweet words. Oddish is wary; he'll always be a little shy, but once he becomes familiar, he soaks up the attention like a Sunkern basking under the sky.

There is food— *so much food.* Things that Oddish has never seen and smelled before.

He samples each one, taking a bite right from Ramos's fingers. He laughs, his old eyes wrinkling, delighted by Oddish's enthusiasm. "Watch it there," he hisses when Oddish accidentally catches his teeth on the tip of his finger.

But the complaint is mostly in jest. Ramos wags his finger and laughs before smoothing his palm over his leaves.

"The kiddos are goin' to open some presents. Why don't we share some tea and watch?"

Oddish settles onto the arm of his chair. Ramos pours out the contents of a thermos, a cup for himself, and then a jar lid for Oddish. He recognizes the smell immediately, the sharp tang of the brew. It's the tea leaves that they cultivated together during the summer.

He chirps, bunting against Ramos's arm. Then he sips at his tea, lapping it up from the lid, enjoying the delightful and earthy taste.

They watch Ramos's grandchildren open their holiday gifts, eyes lighting up as they tear into the paper. Oddish doesn't understand, but he *does* know joy when he sees it.

Gifts are fine things, and the kids squeal with joy as they run around the farmhouse, their new items in hand.

"'Lil sprout, I've got one for you too," says Ramos then, when the room has calmed and his family has dispersed. It's only the two of them, nestled into his armchair, the warmth of the fireplace blazing beside them. He leans to the side and pulls out a small box, no bigger than his palm. "I know yer can't open it, so lemme."

Ramos pops off the lid and sets it down, revealing a red-orange scarf similar to his own. "It isn't much. Just a small thing. My wife knitted it from scraps but... I think it'd be awful cute tied around your leaves. Plus, it'll keep ye warm!"

Oddish trills. It looks warm and fluffy, and in the past, he's rubbed himself against Ramos's scarf, sighing at how it felt. Ramos unfolds it and he waddles closer. The scarf is soft against him as Ramos wraps it around his leaves before tucking it in on itself.

"There ye go," he says affectionately, tugging at the edges to straighten it. "Now we match, eh? And ye got yer own present too."

Oddish chirps as he ruffles his leaves. Then he presses close, nudging Ramos's chest with his body. Ramos is warm and smells like grass, like home.

Then, he thanks the blizzard outside for reinforcing it.

# "Hearth"

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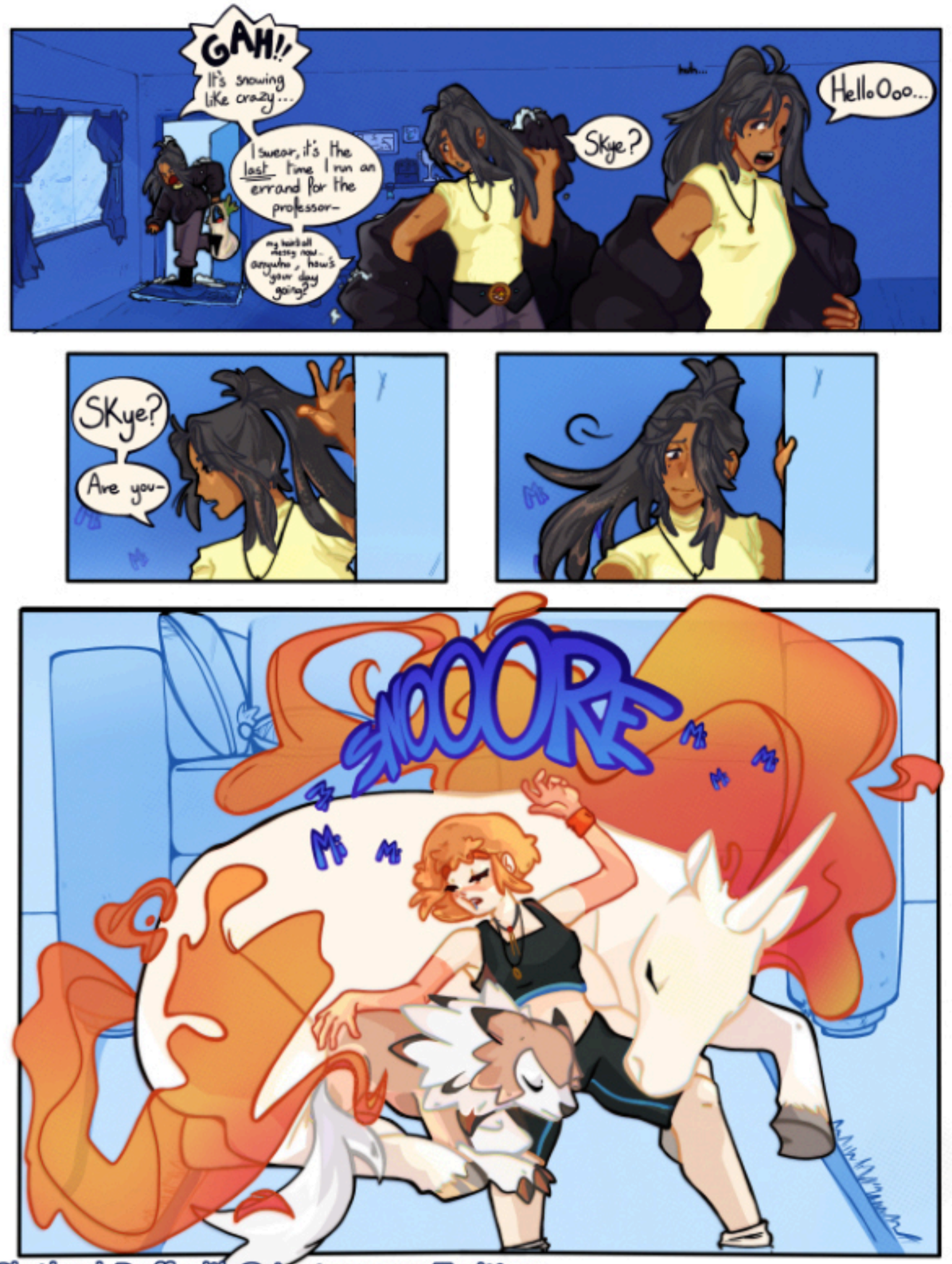

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# Where Warmth Can Be Found

Flurries of snowflakes whipped around the air, shifting patterns of whites and off grays that made up the sky. Growing deeper by the moment, drifts of snow blew across a small frozen lake, deep in the woods of Sinnoh.

The Brave Olivine had come to a last minute emergency landing. The only clearing large enough to fit the whole airship had been next to a tiny, uninhabited lake, and then only barely... For hours of travel now, the expanse of woods had dominated the landscape, nothing but trees until they'd stumbled onto this clearing by chance.

With the current snowstorm only set to get worse over the weekend, Friede had made the call to tie the Olivine down right then and there. They'd worry about trying to dig it out later.

Thus, he, Murdock and Orla, set themselves about driving the anchor pegs down, past the snow banks and as deep into frozen ground as their combined efforts could achieve.

Out from Liko's window, the ship sat high enough to be on equal level with much, though not all, of the tips of the trees. Like a clean slice in the landscape, the patch they'd landed in was large enough to park the Olivine, and walk all the way around, though not much larger. Off the port side, instead of giving way to trees, the clearing led right out onto the lake. Liko couldn't tell exactly where the lake started and the grass ended, with how heavy the snow had been.

And more than ankle deep in that snow, Orla and Murdock took turns desperately trying to whack a peg into the ground and failing quite badly.

Liko giggled to herself, only slightly mind you, watching their efforts from the warmth of her bedroom.

She couldn't help but feel that sort of buzzing excitement, an undercurrent of electricity at the sight.

It was snow! Real snow, lots of snow!

She wasn't entirely unfamiliar with it, there was snow in Paldea. ...But her little corner of Paldea didn't get snow more often than once a year at best, and hardly anything so much as this!

"Sprigatito?" Liko said, scooping her partner up off the floor and tucking it in close, "Do you wanna come outside with me? It might be a little cold, but it might be fun!"

Sprigatito blinked back at her, large eyes taking in everything she said. Then it reached up, and tapped her on the nose with one paw.

"Myraowha!"

Liko giggled, “I’ll take that as a yes!”

Sprigatito in tow, Liko left her room, making her way down the Olivine’s narrow corridors. There was a persistent chill in the air, part of which Liko knew was owed to half the Furnace Room Pokémon taking station outside at the moment, trying to soften the ground enough to wedge tent pegs in. Part of her felt bad for not helping, though Orla had insisted she not worry about it.

Bursting through Liko’s swirling thoughts, Roy’s voice echoed alongside his footsteps as he dashed towards her from behind.

Roy ran up, ramming into Liko as he threw one arm around her shoulder.

“Liko!” He exclaimed, meeting her with eyes shining brightly, “Are you excited?”

Liko nodded, slightly taken aback by his enthusiasm. Not that she didn’t share in it, of course, just by the concentrated energy of his excitement.

“I’ve never seen snow in real life before now! It looks really really soft and super-duper fluffy! And cold too, yeah!”

Liko smiled, ducking her head down.

“Y-yeah! I’m excited too. I’ve always wanted to really play in the snow, like in books and movies and things, but I’ve never had the chance to… We hardly got any snow at my house when I was growing up, and this is my first time out of Paldea in the winter.”

This only made Roy grin wider.

“Alriiiiight! We’re gonna have so much fun together, playing in the snow for the first time!”

As Roy said this however, he found Liko no longer keeping pace beside him. Instead, she’d hung back slightly, lingering in front of a door.

Dot’s door.

“Liko?”

“Do you think—” Liko began, hesitating on the words, “—would Dot want to come with us? Out in the snow?”

Roy leaned back on one leg, fidgeting back and forth as he weighed the options.

“I dunno. I hope so! It’d be even more fun if all three of us went out together! Well, three of us, and Sprigatito!”

Sprigatito mewled in acknowledgement, though Liko remained focused on the door.

“Ah… um… It probably won’t hurt to ask then—” Liko raised a hand to the door, giving it a gentle knock, “D-Dot! Are you in there?”

With no further warning, Roy bent down and stuck his head through the Pokémon flap in Dot’s door.

“Heeeeeey! Doooot! Come outside with us! We can make a snowman! Or a snow fort! Or, Quaxly stop that—”

Roy pulled his head out and tumbled back just as quickly as he’d stuck it in, falling flat on his back. The flap rustled, as Quaxly jumped through it. It stood looking up at Liko for a moment, before turning its head to face the door, expectantly.

Liko followed suit, and after a second, the door handle slowly began to turn. The door was pulled back, revealing Dot’s head poking out to look up at Liko.

“No way,” Dot said flatly.

Liko felt her heart fall for a moment. This was to be expected but… she couldn’t help but be the slightest bit disappointed.

Maybe it showed on her face, or maybe Dot just knew her that well, but she followed up her rejection. “Sorry. It’s not you guys, I just…” She groaned, words getting caught. “Just. It’s a pain. Going outside, especially in the cold… It’s. Gghhh…”

Dot groaned, slinking further back behind the door. Without waiting for Liko’s reply, nor finishing her sentence, Dot closed the door, shutting herself away once more.

Roy frowned. “Maybe we can convince her—”

But Liko interjected before he could finish the thought. “If Dot says she doesn’t want to… I don’t want to push her to something she won’t enjoy. Let’s… let’s go for now. We’ll have fun, you and me.” There was a hint of hesitation on Roy’s face, of sadness, but still…

“Yeah, let’s go.”

They headed forward.

***

A wave of cold air overcame Liko as she stepped out onto the deck, carefully making her way down onto the ramp leading to the ground.
The snow was light at the moment, a scattering of flakes sparkling across the sky, but if the dark clouds in the distance were any indication, it was only a matter of time.

Here though, where Liko stood, a vivid blue sky shone overhead, despite the snow blowing about. The tops of the trees lingered in the edge of her vision, no matter which way she looked.

She hadn’t quite made it to the end of the ramp before Roy sprinted past her, running straight ahead into the snow with Fuecoco following close by.

“Come on!” He exclaimed.

Liko giggled, and carefully stepped off the ramp and down into the snow.
Coming around from the bow were Friede, Orla, and Murdock, chatting lightly as they went. Between Orla’s orange jacket and Murdock’s red coat, Friede stuck out like a sore thumb, dressed no differently than normal.

Friede cut himself off mid sentence when he laid eyes on Liko and Roy.

"Of course not— Ah! Hey, you two. Heading out to enjoy the snow?"

The children nodded.

"What about you?" Liko asked, "Have you finished anchoring the ship down?"

"Sure did!" Orla piped up, waving a mallet in the air. "This baby's not going anywhere."

"All thanks to Rockruff helping dig the holes." Murdock's deep voice chimed in cheerfully, holding up the aforementioned Pokémon. Both of them wore fluffy pink hats and scarves, matching each other.

"You mean Metagross helping drive in the pegs, right?" Orla added, leaning over on Murdocks shoulder, the orange tips of her hair spilling out of her green hat; the whole mix clashing horribly.

"Absolutely not," He replied, deadpan.

"Now, now, we all helped equally," Friede said, pushing in between them and putting a hand on both of their arms with a playful grin.

Orla and Murdock glared at him, "You barely did anything!" They said in unison.

Friede laughed sheepishly.

"Well, you two probably want to head inside and warm up! I'll stay out with the kids a little longer—"

"Oh no you won't!" Molly's voice echoed from a higher deck, leaning over the railing. Despite still being on the ship, albeit on the deck, she'd wrapped herself in a thick white scarf. "Not dressed like that you're not! Get back in here and warm up! No one is catching cold on my watch, I refuse to deal with any sick crew members! You will take care of your health!"

Friede sighed, turning towards the children.

"Keep yourselves warm alright? Or else Molly will have a fit."

"I heard that!"

Opting to ignore Molly's shouting, Friede focused back on Liko and Roy.

"Molly is right, just don't tell her I said that. Don't stay out too long, the storm's only going to get worse so get all your energy out before it gets too wild. And hey, I know you normally go wherever, but try and stick close to the ship for today? The last thing we want is for anyone to go missing in a blizzard."

Liko swallowed. The snow was exciting, and pretty, but it was dangerous too. Maybe Dot had the right idea...

"And be careful," Friede continued, "It's a bit hidden by the snow, but there is a lake out there, so it's easy to slip. Frozen solid though, no danger of falling through, but you should still be careful."

Liko nodded attentively, Roy following her lead, albeit a few moments later, distracted by releasing Fuecoco from its ball.

"Great. See that tree over there?"

Friede pointed in the distance to a large pine tree, towering over the others in the area. It stood opposite the lake to their shore, right at the edge.

"That's your landmark. It points right up at the sun, and when the sun sets the shadow points right back towards the ship. If you can see the sun setting, it's late enough you should go in. Got it?"

"Got it!"

"Good. Now the rest of us will head in. Murdock will get some nice warm food going for us, and Orla will get the furnace running nice and hot."
"Oh, I will?" Orla interjected, "And what will you be doing?"

"Taking a well deserved break," Friede replied with a grin.

Before Orla or Murdock could reply to that, Molly interjected again.

"Everyone *not* wearing a proper winter jacket and hat needs to get inside *right* now or I'm sending Chansey to *drag* you in!"

Orla grinned — "She's talking to *you*~" — pushing Friede forward a bit as she waved up to Molly.

"Don't worry, Mol! Idiots don't catch colds."

"You'd better hope so!"

With that, the adults waved off, and headed up and inside, leaving Roy and Liko alone.

For a moment, they just stood there, taking in the atmosphere of it all.

Rings of evergreen trees made up the foliage surrounding the lake, shades varying from a paler near turquoise to a richer dark green. A few bare trees, leaves long since fallen, stood out among the fir and pine, though all were united in the blankets of snow along their arms.

The wind was still gentle, but it whistled a melody past Liko's ears. There was a haunting tone to it, teasing almost. It danced its way through the tree branches, tossing up specks of snow into sparkles of light and stardust. Scattered chirps from bird Pokémon became caught in the sound.

Cold seeped into her the longer she stood there, still. She felt it first in her face, and her legs. The way it seemed to wrap around her in an embrace. For a moment, a sense of fear and hesitation crept closer—

"Hey, Liko! Roy!"

Friede's voice echoed from upwards, and the children whipped around to see Friede waving to them from the Olivine's deck.

"There's one more thing I forgot to tell you!"

Liko straightened, paying close attention.

"Have fun!"

And with that, Liko felt all the tension leave her, like a gust of wind.

She let a giggle slip out of her mouth and watched how it crystallized in front of her, a million tiny droplets in a puff of fog from her lips.

Scooping down, Liko picked up Sprigatito.

“Alright, Roy,” She said, grin stretching wide. “What should we do first?”

Roy grinned sharply, a spark of excitement in his eyes.

“First things first!” He declared, spreading his arms out wide. Then, he promptly fell backwards, flat on his back.

“R-Roy!?”

Liko darted over, worriedly peering down at Roy’s face. Roy simply grinned back at her.

“We gotta make Snow Togekiss!”

Saying this, he waved his arms and legs up and down, brushing the snow back and forth in a pattern.

“Okay, now help me up!”

Roy stuck his hands in the air, and Liko yanked him up, stumbling back a bit with the weight.

“There!” He declared, gesturing towards his handiwork. “A snow Togekiss!”

Liko squinted down at the shapes, leaning forward a bit and allowing Sprigatito a closer look.

“It doesn’t… really look… like a Togekiss.”

“Yes it does!” Roy replied, walking around. He pointed towards part of the figure with the tip of his snow boot.

“Seeeee~ that’s the wing! And my head, that’s the head! And the bottom parts its body and the tail! Togekiss!”

Liko squinted harder.

Waddling through the snow, Fuecoco walked up to the top of the figure, spewing a few flames from its mouth. Carefully, it drew three lines at the top of the figure.

“Ahh, thanks Fuecoco! See, there’s it’s head feathers!”

“Ohhh! I see it now!” Said Liko, who did not in fact, see it now.

Satisfied, Roy turned to face the lake.

“What should we do next?” Liko asked, coming to stand beside him, “I’ve never had this much snow before, I’m not sure what to do with all of it…”

“What do you wanna do?” Roy asked. He spread his arms out wide, gesturing broadly. “We can do whatever you want!”

Liko teetered in place for a moment, considering. Sprigatito, none too fond of waiting, pawed at her boot, then skittered towards the lake.

"Sprigatito's right," Liko said, walking after it, "Let's go look at the lake!"

As the children proceed forward, Liko took the lead, veering right towards a small ledge, serving as a mini cliff before giving way to the frozen lake. In the distance, the pine tree could be seen, keeping a watchful eye.

"Mroaw!" Sprigatito didn't hesitate to get itself onto the ice, leaping off the ledge and landing onto the lake, immediately sliding a few meters away.

"Whoa, slippy!" Roy exclaimed, watching Sprigatito travel like a curling stone, spraying up a cloud of snow. "My turn!"

He took a running start, then with targeted precision, ran towards the lake, diving off the ledge. With arms outstretched, he flopped onto the ice, cushioned by the heavy snow layer, and skidded several meters further than Sprigatito, giggling wildly and spinning in circles. Fuecoco followed suit, though it tripped at the last moment of its run, and tumbled over itself, rolling across the lake instead of sliding.

"Come on, Liko!" Roy called, sitting up to wave towards her.

Liko hesitated, eyeing the cliff face. It wasn't a high drop by any means, but enough to make her nervous.

"I don't know about this!" She called back.

Roy frowned.

"What if you slide from the beachy bit? Over there!"

He pointed to Liko's left, a nearly seamless meeting spot between lake and grass.

"A-alright! Here I go!"

With a quick burst of speed, Liko darted forward, dropping to her knees as she hit the ice, and sliding several meters– right into Roy.

"Oof!" "Waugh!"

Liko stumbled over her words, trying to apologize, but Roy cut her off before she could even speak.

"That was *awesome!* Let's do it again!"

They *did,* both of them, finding different ways to slide across the ice, drawing lines and shapes in the layer of snow settled on the lake. It was only once Liko found the sunset light reflecting in her eyes against the ice she realized how long it'd been.

"W-w-we s-should probably g-g-get inside." Liko chattered, teeth clacking together. It was a new, somewhat strange sensation.

Roy giggled, "L-L-L-Liko! Your l-l-lips are turning b-b-blue a-a lit-t-le!"

Liko ducked her face down into her scarf, breath caught within warming her only slightly.

“W-w-well!” She replied, “Y-y-yours are t-t-turning pu-purple!”

Only slightly, just at the edges, but the hint of a warning Liko wouldn’t ignore. Though her fingers had grown somewhat numb, Liko reached for Roy’s hand, mitten meeting mitten.

“Come on, let’s go in.”

Nodding, Roy followed, with Sprigatito and Fuecoco at his heels. Shaking, but satisfied, they trudged through the snow back towards the airship.

With stumbling steps, Liko and Roy made it back inside the Olivine, the wind whipping up behind them.

Both of them shivered heavily, standing close together as they proceeded in.

Orla was the first to greet them, poking her head in as she walked by. Her hair was still somewhat frizzy from the hat she’d been wearing.

“Finally decided to come in, eh? Had fun? No one’s lost a limb to the cold?”

Roy and Liko looked at each other, and simply burst into giggles once more.

As the storm grew wilder and louder, the ship stayed warm and bright within. Bundled in warm clothes and warm blankets, having a hot meal for dinner, the cold began to seem more and more like a distant memory. But throughout the evening, past dinner into night, even as it grew late, the storm persisted.

Liko couldn’t sleep.

Perhaps due to the storm, but a sort of feeling in her chest told her it was something else. Restless, she headed out of her room.

The elevator came to a stop at the apex of the ship, doors opening out onto the observation deck. Armed with her warmest sweater, Liko stepped out. Directly in front of her, curled up in front of the windows, was Dot and Roy, a couple feet apart from each other.

Roy pressed his face up against the window, while Dot left one hand hovering in front of the glass, not quite touching it.

Carefully, Liko walked forward, mindful not to disturb either of them. She slipped between them carefully, slotting herself in just right. There, the glare from the indoor lights was hidden by her shadow, and the snow whipping by could be seen. It was only visible in the lights outside the Olivine, mounted on its sides to light up the deck.

Cast in reds and oranges, thousands upon thousands of snowflakes raced by one another, only seen for a fragment of a second, a fraction of the night sky slit by lights.

“There’s so muuuuch…” Roy breathed out, trying to press himself even closer against the glass.

A noticeable amount of snow was cumulating at the edges, blown against and obscuring it. “But you can barely even see it without the lights.”

“It was forecast to be a historic storm. The whole city shut down, not that it matters here,” Dot added, voice somewhat mumbling the words.

“Amazing… kind of scary but… amazing.” Liko found herself saying. “I can’t believe we were just out there a little while ago.”

Dot shrunk back slightly hearing that.

“Ah, mhm. You were. Was it…” She hesitated, seemingly uncertain of her next words. “Was it… fun?”

“Extra super awesome fun!” Roy said, whipping his head around to face Dot. “It was even better than I thought it was going to be!”

But as much as Liko felt the same, the words got caught on her tongue when she watched Dot seemingly fold in on herself.

She’d said she didn’t want to come, but…

Liko looked out the window again, but let her eyes focus on the reflections instead of the snowscape. In Dot’s eyes, reflected on the glass, there was a bit of loneliness she could see. A hint of longing.

“…It was fun,” Liko said, carefully, “Really, really fun. But it would’ve been more fun… if you were there too, I think.”

Dot was silent.

After a moment, only the wind filling in the quiet, she replied.

“Maybe.”

Dot didn’t say another word after that. None of the children did. Instead, they let the whispers of the wind lull them towards sleep, until each of them parted from the observation deck, and headed off to bed.

***

The first thing Dot really registered when she woke up was the cold, the way it seeped into her face. She curled up closer, pulled the blankets around her into a tighter Cascoon.

It was still dark out, Dot could tell even without opening her eyes. Much too early to be awake, certainly.

Yet here she found herself, awake regardless.

The second thing Dot registered was the voice — “Dot!” — Liko’s voice — “Dot, are you awake?” — calling to her from beyond the door.

“Mmgh,” Dot mumbled back, refusing to open her mouth or eyes.

It was quiet for a moment, and Dot nearly sunk back into sleep. But there, somewhat hesitantly, was Liko’s voice again.

“D-Dot I know, I know you don’t like going outside! And we asked yesterday, and you said you didn’t want to. T-that’s okay, I think! I don’t want to… push you into doing things that won’t make you happy. B-but at the same time—! I want to enjoy the snow with you! We both do. And m-maybe you’d like it. So… would you come out, please? Let’s see the snow and the sunrise, together! …Would you do that, for us?”

Something stirred in Dot’s heart. Call it affection, excitement, or maybe just a simple wish. She couldn’t say. Her reasoning was the same as before, her thinking hadn’t changed.

Going outside was a pain, it made her nervous. She hated the cold. She’d rather just stay nice and warm in her room.

Dot poked her head out the door, cautiously peering around the frame.

…In the end, Liko and Roy’s smiling faces kept her warmer than anything else in the ship ever could.

***

Dot sunk slightly into the snow with each step she took. Last night’s storm had been as strong as it appeared from the observation deck, some drifts now up past her shins. There was a soft, squeaking sort of crunch that each of her steps made, the snow compacting beneath her boot. There was a subtle sort of divot, impressions where Dot assumed Liko and Roy had played the day prior. With how heavy the snow fall had been, these were mere phantoms in the ice, and Dot’s own imagination filling in the gaps.

Beyond her footsteps — their prints, the three of them — it was near silent. Each and every bird Pokémon had hidden themselves so deeply away they remained silent now, even as dawn approached.

A soft breeze blew across the lake, toying with the snowflakes that had come to rest on its shores. Nothing all too strong, but the clouds in the distance loomed as a reminder of the inevitable. This was a lull, a break.

She kept her head low, tucking her face against her pink scarf to protect from the cold. Not that she could see much of the color, the darkness leeching away the hue. It was only the gentle glow of the Olivine against the final remnants of night, growing dimmer with each step they took.

Only the Olivine, but at the edges of the horizons, the deep colors began to soften. The night began to fade.

The snow had started to meld with the signs of the oncoming sunrise, the hues blurring together.

All three had made it to the edges of the lake before the sun had slipped into view, and they came to rest on the edge of that small cliff face.

Dot found herself to Liko’s right, with Roy pressed against her left.

With all of them together, Liko pulled back the woolen shawl she’d hastily grabbed as they’d departed, Dot recognized it was Orla’s.

“Come closer. It’ll be warmer this way.”

Anywhere else, any time else, Dot would've coldly denied. But there was something about this, the gentle snow and the chill around her, that made Dot so much warmer in comparison. Cautiously, nervously, she leaned in a bit closer, coming to rest against Liko's shoulder. She could hear Liko's breathing, and Roy's gentle giggles as he shuffled in. Liko draped the shawl across the three of them, then settled her head down against Dot's, with Roy on her left shoulder.

With the three of them tucked together, the light finally, finally, spilt out across the skyline, lighting up the clouds that stirred in the distance, igniting the colors of the sky. Softer pinks that bled into purples of a lavender sort, the edges in a pale blue, though the clouds that swirled in the distance carried the same shades  in a stronger, deeper tone.

Long shadows were thrown across the lake, the few trees that stood between the Olivine and the water reflected against the ice. The silhouette of all three of them blurred together, so close they shared the same shadow. That light beamed down onto the children, a hesitant warmth Dot swore she could feel as it hit her.

A warmth that carried, even as snowflakes gently settled upon them, coming to rest upon Dot's eyelashes, Roy's nose, Liko's cheeks.

"Dot..." Liko breathed out, sounding out the name slowly, as though she were afraid speaking too loudly would shatter the display ahead of her, "Tha... Thank you. I'm glad you're here."

Roy hummed in agreement, chiming in atypically softly, "Yeah, I'm so happy we got to see this together."

Silence for a moment, and Dot pressed her face in a little closer to her companions.

"Yeah," Her voice rang out, "Me too."

A sound that would carry throughout the pristine white landscape, and into their futures, together.

"Where Warmth Can Be Found"

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# Warmth of Night's End

The cabin door creaked open, and one by one, each of the Eeveeloutions trotted inside. Clumps of snow on their fur began to melt, drenching each of them in cold water. From the door, well into the cabin, the water dripped off of their fur and congregated into a pool trailing behind them. None of them paid any mind to the water on the wood, as the heat from the fireplace would soon take care of drying the floor. Hopefully, the heat would not dry up the Vaporeon, but at this point, she felt as if she was at risk of her body solidifying if she didn't seek out warmth.

All nine of them took their turns attempting to shake off the cold water and clumps of snow, only for it to splash right onto the ones closest to them. The Flareon got off rather easy, as her natural body heat instantaneously vaporized any water droplets that made contact with her fur. The Glaceon did not mind the splash of cold either, as he naturally thrived in such conditions. In fact, he much preferred this feeling compared to the radiation of an open flame.

Life slowly started to return to them, especially the Leafeon, who was acting as if he was on the verge of wilting just earlier in the evening. Though now in the comfort of the warmth of the cabin, one in particular had left some business unfinished.

The Jolteon was rather dissatisfied with his defeat by holiday lights failing to be properly strung, and the snarl on his face showed that he was still raring to return to the battle. He wasn't alone in his desires, however, as the Glaceon was already missing the comfort of the cold and ice in between his paws.

As for the Eevee, well, she would be overjoyed to once again return to the snowscape, that is, if she had any energy left. The last spark of desire that still burned within her was impressive enough, considering how long she actually lasted in the freezing temperatures at her young age. She would not protest an opportunity to return outside for just a few more moments, but she was comfortable on top of the Espeon's back, and he did not seem intent on facing the cold winter's night once more. The Umbreon was in silent agreement with the Espeon that perhaps, it was more ideal for the Eevee to rest and regain her strength, along the others. It wasn't like she always willing to listen to the two, but the Eevee did not have the energy to defy their wishes.

Laying down in front of the fireplace, she noticed that although it was still rather warm, the heat was being provided by mere embers on their last breath of life. She called for some wood to be thrown in, but alas, the stock was almost completely depleted. With the temperatures drastically falling as the night went on, one of them was going to have to brave the cold and acquire some wood to keep the cabin warm throughout the night.

Who else would be better to take down some trees than the already fired up Jolteon?  He was still rather frustrated with his defeat earlier, and so striking down some wood would be a reasonable method of productively relieving stress.

The Flareon would go with him, however, free reign of firepower should not be carelessly utilized around a vulnerable wooden shelter.

While the Jolteon slipped through the door to hunt down suitable logs to use as fuel, the Vaporeon made the suggestion of perhaps making some hot chocolate in the meantime to tie everyone over. Her suggestion received unanimous support, as even the cold loving Glaceon would not turn down a sweet treat.

The Umbreon and Espeon worked together to grab enough packets of hot chocolate from the cabinet. The Espeon climbed on top of the Umbreon and, despite their synergy, did not exactly have it easy attempting to keep balance. They did manage to pull down enough packs without any casualties, but not without the Espeon tumbling off of the Umbreon's back, knocking her onto the floor with him.

The Sylveon shot a rather confused glance at the duo, with his facial expression signifying, "why didn't you just get my assistance in the first place?" It was more likely the two of them showing off just how well they worked with each other, but the priorities of the others lied elsewhere, such as the hot chocolate at stake.

The Sylveon forcefully shoved the two aside, taking over in order to prevent further botched performances. He grabbed a kettle to set down in front of the Vaporeon to fill, as well as exactly enough mugs for all of them, including the currently resting Eevee and absent Jolteon. For the most part, it was a team effort.

The Leafeon was nowhere to be found by the stove. Instead, he was rather content warming up by the fireplace alongside the Eevee.

At the same time, he seemed to be indirectly conveying just how incredibly cold *he was feeling. His wincing was somewhat* justifiable, given how he wasn't exactly suited for harsh, cold environments. However, ulterior motives were at play here, and it was, for the most part, an act to lure to Flareon into once again laying with him.

Nobody was buying his act. Not even the Eevee, who was half asleep and felt as if she was mentally on another planet. She knew all too well that he was "secretly" begging for the Flareon's attention, who was too busy to pay any attention to his begging. It was rather embarrassing, really.

The Eevee desired only to nap, at least until the hot chocolate was prepared. That was proving to be rather impossible feat, however. Through the windows, she could see the night sky being lit up with the lightning shocks of the Jolteon, creating a rather spectacular light show. She was well aware that he wasn't too happy about his failure to string the lights prior, but not *that* unhappy to put on a light show of his own. A little dramatic for cutting down trees, if you ask her.

Not only that, but the needy Leafeon whining about being cold (desiring the company of the Flareon) was starting to get under her skin. Despite somehow wanting to get away from these annoyances temporarily and seek tranquility further away in the forest, she was having a difficult time fighting off the urge to sleep. The Eevee was kept awake only by those two causing far too much of a ruckus, and despite knowing that the Jolteon and Flareon were quite busy doing them all a favor, she wanted them both to return as soon as possible just so she could possibly get some shut eye.

Her wish may be partially fulfilled soon, as the cups of hot chocolate were just about finished being prepared. The Espeon and Umbreon insisted on working together to, once again, show off just how compatible they were, but the Sylveon once again shoved them out of the way and grabbed the water with his feelers himself. He was no Psychic-type, but he could foresee one of those two dumping hot water on an innocent bystander and scalding them. The last thing anyone needed were second degree burns to tend to after everyone was already exhausted enough.

The cups were neatly arranged and each had one packet of instant hot chocolate mix poured into them. The Sylveon, to the best of his ability, carefully began to pour the water into the cups. The Flareon grabbed a spoon and awkwardly tilted her head to the side and tarted stirring the mixture, unbothered by the hot water splashing against her fur. The Umbreon glanced at her with a concerned side eye, a bit confused as to how a Fire-type was remaining unaffected y perhaps her greatest weakness. The droplets splashing against her ace were in such miniscule amounts, and so they sizzled away practically instantaneously, causing no harm.

Nudging their cups along the floor (due to an unfortunate lack of hands), the Eeveeloutions slowly made their way along to all gather around the fireplace. Well, all except for the Glaceon that is, who was enjoying the dwindling temperatures away from the direct heat. In spirit, he was laying right in the midst of them all, but hysically, he preferred to distance himself from as much warmth as possible.

The flame was growing smaller by the minute, and the temperatures were noticeably dropping in the cabin.

The hot chocolate could only last them for so long before they would have to resort to each other as a source of warmth. Unsurprisingly, the Leafeon, despite being one of the more susceptible to the cold, did not seem to mind this possibility one bit. Anything that gave him an excuse to huddle closer to the Flareon, he was going to jump at.

After a while, they realized that the sky was no longer being lit up with furious thunderbolts. It remained eerily silent for quite some time, and confused glances were exchanged between each other once the realization truly sat in. Suddenly, the door flung open, and their heads turned to face the door practically in sync. The chill from outside invaded on their space, blasting each of them in the face. In the doorway, they saw the Jolteon all by himself attempting to push the logs through, as they were far too wide to simply roll.

Eager for one last taste of the cold, the Glaceon leaped up and provided him with some extra firepower to help push the logs inside. Once all of the logs were shoved into the cabin, the Jolteon slammed the cabin door shut. They may be inside now, but the logs still needed to be stacked safely to the side, as well as a few thrown in to refuel the flames. With still having labor ahead of him, the Jolteon scrunched his nose and weakly snarled out of irritation. For a Pokémon that was still rather young, he had the attitude of an old soul.

The Sylveon used his feelers to aid the Jolteon in lifting the logs, and the Flareon spat a few embers into the fireplace to once more bring life to the flame. Finally, with the fire once again burning bright, and the hot chocolate cooled to a temperature comfortable enough to drink, they were all able to settle down together for the evening.

The Glaceon was still physically close in spirit, as he especially had no interest in laying in front of a brightly burning flame. In fact, he had so little interest in the warmth, that he frosted the outside of his coffee cup to bring the temperature of his drink down further. Unsurprisingly, the Espeon and Umbreon were on the verge of falling asleep together, leaving half drank hot chocolate in front of them. The Eevee, on the verge of falling asleep herself, winced at the two, though she sleepily eyed up their hot chocolate, should an opening arise for her to swipe their drinks for herself.

The consistently cold Leafeon was shooting "desperate" glances at the Flareon, occasionally looking back at the Espeon and Umbreon to get his point across. She had already curled up with the Eevee, who arguably needed the warm comfort more than he did. His futile attempts became fewer and farther in between as the evening went on, only subsiding once he fell asleep.

The Vaporeon was already fast asleep, confident that she would not freeze over now that the fire was going strong. Soon to follow, the Jolteon would eventually fall asleep himself, too tired to continue fussing over a battle surrendered previously in the evening.

With the stories that each of the nine Pokémon could tell, one might presume that they are speaking of a year's worth of tales. This night, however, was only the first of many snowfalls to come that winter.

And though each snowfall may feel the same as the last, one has but a singular chance to experience a first snowfall only once in their lives, and this was one that the young Eevee would look back upon with great fondness for as long as she may live.

"Warmth of Night's End"

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# A Sweet Yuletide

Paldea is unusually bitter at ten degrees Celsius. Yet, the cold has hit the region with a shivering breeze that has forced many Pokémon and students to take shelter from the blizzard that's reported to come within the hour.

Juliana is no different.

If she can make it through Cortando without any stops, she should make it back in time before the storm hits. Juliana's Rotom has been blowing up with calls to double check she's gotten somewhere safe. Director Chavell warned Juliana to stay put, but her rebellious streak is kicking in.

*Even* if she's fatigued...

Katy wasn't kidding when she swore she wouldn't be a pushover anymore after their rematch. That battle was one of the toughest she's ever had. Though Juliana was able to beat her with some ease since she's familiar with Katy's brutal strategy, she's concerned the older woman  has taken it a bit too far.

At this rate, no one will be able to even *start* Victory Road.

She can worry about reporting Katy's aggressive battle strategy later. For now, she needs to get back to her dorm. Koraidon can make it. With his strong legs and endurance, he can get through any climate. Some snow won't stop him.

She begins to pack everything up to get back to the school. She flings her backpack on as she takes out her Koraidon's pokeball. She's greeted by a thick white blanket made of snowflakes and hail pouring down with intensity that she hasn't seen before.

She bites her lip with a firm nod. Even if the weather is unnerving, the duo have been through a *lot* worse.

"Oh, I wouldn't even dare to go out there." Katy interrupts her thoughts by gently grabbing her shoulder. "I know you have that Pokémon that you ride around, but I doubt he'd be able to endure that. It's been so long since Paldea's had such a storm. Come back to my bakery and we can wait the storm out there."

Juliana is about to speak up before Katy shakes her head in protest, raising a hand to speak. She bites her tongue, hearing the gym leader out. "Please, don't attempt to leave."

"It's not too far," Juliana argues.

"No, of course not." Katy agrees before glancing outside. "Though the snow will make that trek a lot more dangerous. As per Lady Geeta's protocol, I would have to stop any students in such dire circumstances."

"I've been through Glasedo Mountain before." Juliana reminds her. "I have Koraidon too. He can make it through."

"Even so, as gym leaders, we're also supposed to keep an eye on *all* the students and keep their safety in consideration when situations like these  arise." Katy lowers her hand and her neutral face is replaced by a welcoming smile. "Besides, I have a lovely batch of cookies and hot chocolate I've been meaning to share with someone. You can be my taste tester if you will."

Koraidon  comes out of the ball without any warning, licking his lips to the prospect of cookies. Though he's usually a sandwich type of Pokémon , Arven gave him some cookies a few days ago and Koraidon has been craving more of the sweet treats since.

Koraidon  looks around with wide eyes before glancing at Juliana with pleading eyes, almost as if he is begging to not challenge the storm.

Juliana glances down the street. Even if the Academy  isn't far away, she can't see the building  from how much snow is falling. Maybe Katy has a point, but she doesn't want to worry her friends...

Nemona and Arven are crazy enough to take the risk to look for her in the blizzard if they were worried she was in any danger. She tries to send a message through her Rotom, but there's only an error letting her know it didn't go through.

*No signal...*

Without any pause, she puts Koraidon back in his ball. She'll have to stay put.

She follows Katy to the side doors and steps outside into the chilly weather. Though the ground is dusted with snow, it has built up in such a short time. When they were battling, there were only dark clouds and a chilly breeze. Now it's almost a winter wonderland. Katy's concerns aren't such an exaggeration anymore.

They make it to the Patisserie Soapberry intact, but Juliana's trying to hold her chattering teeth. Katy opens the door to let her into the back of the bakery. The sweet smell of holiday treats warms Juliana's spirits as she wanders into the cozy bakery.

*It's almost like Mama's kitchen...*

A beautiful cake catches Juliana's eye— one she knows. Her mother always has one ready for Yuletide. The sweet, creamy taste of the Yule Log always gives her a sense of delight every time she serves the delicacy, the delicious taste always making the holidays special.

"Oh, good! It looks like some of the *Tronco de Navidads* are done!" Katy clasps her hands , leaning over to observe the cakes. "With Yule around the corner, we've gotten an uptick of orders for these. I was starting to get worried I'd have to ask Geeta for time off to get them done."

"Is it popular here?"

"Certainly! They're not as popular as *Mantecados*, but they take ages to make, so I always bake them first." Katy rambles, her face brightening as she navigates her bakery space.  She's a busy Combee, moving items around her space as she grabs a tray and filling it with desserts.

"I tried to make some delibird sugar cookies inspired from Galar, but it looks like they're not selling as fast as I thought they would..." Katy hands one to Juliana. "Here you are, dear. There's a chair at that corner that you can make yourself at home. I'm going to prepare that cocoa. I'll be right back."

Katy wanders to the back, turning up the stove as Juliana glances at the decorated table. The table has cotton fluff to represent snow. There's a small tree covered with white dust, donned with ornaments of Snom , Ledyba  dawned in little winter hats and Swadloons wrapped with mini scarfs around their little necks. To complete the beautiful decor, there's some silver garland wrapped around the tree.

"Do you like my little set up?" Katy asks, coming back with a tray filled with more sweets and two steaming mugs. Each pink mug has a painting of a Ribombee on it. She places the cookies on the table and hands Juliana her own mug as she joins the champion.

"Yeah, it's really pretty." Juliana nods, offering a soft smile.

"Thank you! I like to decorate since I rarely leave here during the winter season." Katy glances at the decor.  "I always knew my holidays would be dedicated to helping others celebrate, so I brought my cute little critters to the bakery. Even if it's just ornaments."

"Did you make them?"

"I commissioned Brassius to craft them for me." Katy explains, grabbing a Ledyba and running her finger on the hat. "He did such a lovely job, don't you think?"

# Hot Cocoa Recipe

1/4 cup sugar
1/4 cup unsweetened cocoa powder
1/2 cup hot water
2 cups milk
1 tsp extract of choice

In a pan, stir cocoa, sugar, and water together. Stir constantly as you bring mixture to a boil. Slowly add in milk, warming it up to desired temperature. Take off heat and add extract.

Juliana nods, taking a sip of the warm drink. The thick mixture of warmth, chocolate, and comfort fill her mouth, warming up her body. “This is really good. Thank you.”

“That’s a relief. They’re a new item on the menu, so I appreciate the feedback.” Katy admits, sipping her own drink. “At least it’s warm enough for the chilly weather.”

“Yeah, definitely.” Juliana nods before raising her mug. “I like the mugs too. Did Brassius make these too?”

“Yes, we gym leaders make each other small gifts each year. Well, some purchase the gifts, but the sentiment is still there.” Katy notes as she turns to her desserts. “Obviously, I always make tasty treats for everyone. It’s quite easy to do that considering I have everything ready to go.”

Juliana listens to Katy’s stories about the other trainers with vigor. No matter how many times she’s trained with these leaders, she always feels like she’s missing vital information about them. This moment is perfect to get to know the gym leaders a little better.

“Oh, is your Pokémon shy all of the sudden?” Katy changes the subject before raising one of the cookies. “I brought extra cookies just for him. That boy Arven told me he was a big eater. We’re far enough away from the other sweets, so he can join us.”

Koraidon jumps out of his pokeball after hearing his name, and tilts his head as Katy offers a cookie to him. Koraidon leans in, giving it a cautionary sniff before gobbling down the treat with his teeth, licking his lips with a satisfied growl.

“Oh!” Katy beams. “Even though I mostly bake for people, it does delight me to see Pokémon  enjoying my treats too.”

“Oh, yeah,” Juliana leans down, scratching Koraidon’s  head. “He’s not too picky, but he especially loves homemade food.”

“Well, if you’re ever in the area, I’m more than happy to give him a little snack.” Katy promises as she sips her drink. “Same goes for you. Don’t wear yourself down when you’re still so small.”

“Thanks, Katy.”

“Mmhm.” Katy nods as she stands up, glancing out of her window. “Oh good, it does look like it was a squall after all.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, I was concerned it would have been a blizzard that lasted all evening, but the snowfall has begun to slow down already.” Katy exhales in relief. “My sweet bugs don’t like this weather very much. I’m pretty sure the only cuties enjoying this weather are the Snoms and Frosmoths.”

“Wouldn’t it benefit you to have them on your team?”

“Oh, no.” Katy shakes her head.

“From what most bug types are weak to, that would be just sending them in battle to immediately get squashed without standing a chance. They’re better for ice teams even if they are precious cuties.”

Juliana keeps that in mind as her eyes wander to the window. There's now only a few snowflakes falling on the ground. She exhales in relief through her nose. She didn't want to worry her friends back at the Academy  all night.

"Anyway, it looks like you're in the clear. You better get going in case the storm picks up again." Katy stands up. "Thank you for spending time with me, Champion Juliana. I insist, you should come back sometime and you can be my special taste tester."

"Thank you, I'd love that." Juliana promises, glancing at Koraidon. "And I know he will too."

Katy giggles as she pats Koraidon's head. "Yes, you're such a sweetheart, aren't you? You're welcome here any time as well."

Koraidon  gives an upbeat growl at her response before he stands to follow Juliana out. She gets on his back before Katy comes back with a bag of cookies. "Here, I have some extra. Feel free to share them with your friends or Pokémon. Do take care."

Juliana nods. "Thank you, Katy."

With that, Juliana mounts on Koraidon, ready to rush into the freezing weather before the storm picks up again.

Katy pokes her head out, waiving with a bright smile on her face. "Happy early Yule, dear!"

"Thanks, Katy!" Juliana calls out as Koraidon begins to pick up his pace. "You too!"

***

A few days later, Juliana's back in Cortando, running an important errand. Koraidon  couldn't be more excited to travel today. The snowfall has coated every path of Paldea to the point where most travel has to be done by the flying taxis. Yet, in spite of the weather, Koraidon  is pouncing in the snow, playing around in the piles of white fluffy snow.

Juliana had finally gotten him focused enough to get here, but their errand has taken a lot longer than she would have liked due to his constant distractions. She'd like to be back home, bundled in blankets and surrounded by her friends. This errand *is* important, though. She has to see Katy before the holidays.

After she got back to the Academy the night of the squall, Team Star demolished the cookies Katy sent with her. All of her friends had spent the rest of the night discussing the weather and what to do if the power went out, but Juliana's mind kept wandering to Katy.

Katy's stuck at her bakery for the rest of the season. After all, most people need her time to fulfill their sweet holiday needs. So when Juliana went to visit Mama the next day to check in, Juliana had mentioned her experience and how she was going to try to visit Katy again.

Mama's face brightened as she began to craft a Yule Log  of her own to give to Katy, leaving it with a note. Mama mentioned she should get it to Katy as soon as possible.

Even through the brutal weather, the bakery is slammed with many people getting their orders. Katy's rushing around the shop, making sure every order is fulfilled with ease and a cheery smile on her face.

When Juliana finally makes it to the front of the line, Katy's face lights up seeing the young trainer.

"Hello, Champion! What can I do for you? Unfortunately, I'm already out of *Mantecados,* so I hope you don't need those."

"Actually, I'm not here to make a purchase. My Mama wanted to give this to you." Juliana hands the bag over, pushing it to Katy.

Katy tilts her head as she opens the package, pulling out the card first. She gives a smile before placing it in her apron pocket and then opening up the cake. "Oh! It's my first *Tronco de Navidads!* This is wonderful, I cannot wait to share it with the other gym members. Oh, and she added a little Tarountula web on it. How cute!"

"Haven't you had one before?" Juliana asks. "I'm sure you have made so many before."

Katy shakes her head. "No, I haven't. You're not supposed to make your own. It's customary to give it to others and receive it in return."

Juliana doesn't quite know what Katy means, but she nods, pretending to follow along.

"Your mother is very sweet. Please, tell her thank you and oh!" Katy rushes to the back of the bakery, grabbing a box of her own. "Give her this in my stead. One baker to another. There's also a small gift for you as well."

"I will. Oh, and um, thanks." Juliana beams as she places it in her bag. "I'll come visit after the holidays. I'm about to go home to celebrate so I won't be in town for a bit."

"That's alright, dear. Happy Yule."

Juliana hums with a smile. "You too, Katy."

Koraidon shakes his head, ready to let Juliana ride on his back back to her home. He begins to dash around, pouncing in the snow and occasionally diverting off the road to explore his curiosity, but it's not even a half hour before she's back at her mom's house. When she opens the door, the scent of strong citrus wassil is the only thing she can smell.

Penny, Nemona, along with some of the members of Team Star are playing some games in the living room. Arven is assisting her mother in the kitchen with the cooking. Everyone's head turns when Juliana steps in. Nemona abandons her card deck, swooping Juliana into a tight hug. The others follow almost instantly to swarm her with their own hugs and greetings.

Then it's Giacomo who notices the package in Juliana's arm. "What's that?"

"Oh, this is for Mama." Juliana explains, putting it down on the table.

Mama raises an eyebrow before wandering to the living room. Her face brightens when she opens the box, displaying the *Tronco de Navidads* on the table with the rest of the feast.

Mama pulls out a small Joltik clasp before reading the note. She hands the clasp over to Juliana. "I think this is for you."

Nemona swipes it, placing it in Juliana's hair as the rest of the group of friends remark how cute it is. The conversation dies down as Mama and Arven serve the feast and they focus on the delicious meal. It's the *Tronco de Navidads* that all the students get excited over, gushing about how soft and moist it is. The flavor is so simple and not too sweet — a perfect way to close out the wonderful day.

Each bite reminds Juliana of her newfound friend. She'll have to get Katy a small gift to return the sentiment of the hairclip.

As the night begins to fill with chatter, joy, and many hugs, Juliana cannot be more grateful for her friends, near and far.

"A Sweet Yuletide"

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# Silver Snow

He walked.

The snow was fresh, giving way beneath his boots with satisfying crunching sounds. Flakes still fell, though not as heavy as before; they drifted, plump and carefree, from the clouds above. Silver walked through them all, feeling them catch on his eyelashes and melt against his cheeks.

He should have worn a hat. Even the snow-creatures in the front gardens he passed by were wearing hats, with gloves upon their stick-limbs. The breeze tousled his hair, frost burning the tops of his ears, and he shoved his hands under his armpits in hopes of warming his fingers.

It was only mid-evening, but even so, the sky was dark as night. Looking up, Silver blinked the snowflakes from his eyes to find clouds blanketing the horizon. No stars could be seen tonight. Perhaps that was for the best; somehow, the blinking of the stars always reminded Silver of his father's eyes — cold, cruel, always watching.

A quiet yip from his side made Silver look down, finding Sneasel trotting by his side.

*"Sorry,"* he muttered, reaching down a hand and tickling his partner's feather-ear.

It seemed Sneasel could sense whenever such thoughts arose — and would do his best to offer a distraction. "You're right," Silver said. He leant down, scooped up Sneasel in his arms, and continued walking. "Tonight's much too pretty to be thinking like that."

Sneasel, for once, sat happily in Silver'sarms. Back when they were challenging the League, Sneasel would riot at any kind of babying: when he was injured and Silver would pick him up, he would squirm his way free, preferring to limp to the Pokémon Center rather than accept aid. That was back in the bad times — when both Trainer and Pokémon were too proud to admit weakness — but now was different. Now, after having been through so much together, Sneasel could allow Silver to carry him. Sometimes, you needed a hug from your best friend.

Mahogany Town. The street lamps lining the paths glowed amber, causing the snow stretching out across the roads to turn a peachy-pink hue. Little cottages were interspersed with traditional storefronts, all of which were closed and shuttered for the winter break.

"This is home," he whispered, and Sneasel looked up at him. The word felt strange on Silver's tongue. He had been born here, and had grown up here for the first ten years of his life. While mostly confined to the manor house set back in the trees on the outskirts of the Lake of Rage, with a long and barren garden in which to see the sun, Silver would get to venture out sometimes into the town-

- through which he now walked. Back then, the children playing in the streets would stare at him and whisper; the wild Pidgeotto would flee when he neared; and the shopkeepers would take one glance at his red hair and narrow their eyes, their greetings curt and their service abrupt.

It had never really felt like a home. The house wasn't cosy, nor familial: just bare walls and plain furniture to fill the otherwise barren rooms. But when the weather in Johto turned — the roads too perilous to journey through, the Pokémon Center lodging too crowded — Silver found he had nowhere else to go. Typhlosion provided some warmth when huddled against, but the biting winds would cut through the walls of his tents and the morning dew chilled him to the bone. Since his mother was off who-knew-where, and Celebi only knew what had happened to his father, Silver was all alone — house to himself.

But that house was too full of ghosts to stay there for long. Alakazam's psychic powers had helped clear up the dust, and Crobat would fly out to collect firewood, but even still, shadows lurked in the corners that made even Gengar shudder. Too many unpleasant memories — too much of his father. Silver only wanted to wait out the bad weather… but even that was proving difficult. It was lucky he liked going for long walks.

Sneasel gave another yip from his arms, and Silver tore his eyes away from the snow to see where his claws were pointing. Beside them, a stout brick wall separated the path from a row of terraced brick houses, each with warm windows and puffs of smoke billowing from the chimneys.

The front yards boasted snow-capped lawns, with some making way for snow sculptures shaped like Pikachu and Stantler and most of all, Delibird. One house even showed a small offering to Articuno: a pile of ice bricks giving thanks to the deity that brought them the winter. A couple of small wrapped boxes were piled at the bottom; gifts.

*Gifts*… Silver recalled seeing gifts being exchanged by children in the town centre, in television programs and movies, and even now being offered to the legendary Pokémon. Silver never had that. His parents would never give him gifts, and he had no friends with whom to exchange them. The concept was completely unfamiliar to him. In his childhood, winter would just mean being cold and lonely… but at least it had allowed him to meet Sneasel.

He remembered being ten years old, tears freezing to his cheeks, his mother's shouts ringing in his ears. The flames in his chest had died down after he'd realised how bad the snowstorm was. The option was to either press on and risk perishing in the blizzard, or turn back and return home. Neither option was preferable. And just when he'd resorted to huddling down in a snowbank, racked by sudden terror, he'd heard the yips.

A tiny Sneasel, injured and scared. It had collapsed in the snowbank, and Silver had felt the flames inside him reignite. A protective instinct had taken over — he'd rushed to the side of the little creature, attempted to scoop it into his arms, and the Sneasel had protested with a hiss and a snarl. What a horrible Pokémon, he'd thought to himself… before realising he would react in the exact same way.

An instant bond. A trip to the Pokémon Center and a Poké Ball later, and now here they were, after so many years. Silver was still in the same situation, wandering through Mahogany Town in the snow, but now was different.

Now, he did have a family. He had no parents, had no friends, but he had his team — his Pokémon partners. Silver stopped in his tracks, his heart suddenly warm. A smile curled the corner of his lip as he reached with one hand down to his belt.

Sneasel leapt out of his arms onto the floor, grinning up at him. Silver pressed the buttons on each of his Poké Balls, and out came his partners. Typhlosion first, who felt snowflakes land on his fur and stepped closer to Silver at once; then Magneton, looking equally unhappy about the weather; Alakazam glanced curiously at the sky, holding up his spoons and making the flakes flurry around them; and lastly, Gengar and Crobat, who both bared their teeth in grins before chasing one another down the street.

Now was not the time for sadness. No remembering the past, no wallowing in what never was. Now, it was time to be with his Pokémon — to allow them to experience the joys of winter and fun of snow.

Now, it was time to make new memories.

"Silver Snow"

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# 'Twas the Night Before WIGGLY-mas

by Winter Hart Arts

[T'was the night before Christmas, and all through the house...]

[Not a Pokemon was stirring, not even Tandemaus...
Or Pikachu... Or Bulbasaur...]

[or all of you sweeties!]

zzz...

[... When up on the roof, there arose such a clatter...]

zzz...

zzz



!

gasp

JINGLE JINGLE...

?

WIGGLY!

Bulba!

!

zzz...

END.

AND THAT'S THE LAST ORNAMENT. DONE!

HOLD UP, WE HAVE A PROBLEM.

?

WE FORGOT THE TREE TOPPER...

WHOA, WAIT...!

!!

HEY SNOM!

YOU CAME OUT TO HELP!

YEAH! YOU CAME IN CLUTCH BUDDY!

SNOM, YOU'RE SO CUTE! WHAT DO YOU THINK?

UH... HE DOESN'T LOOK TOO HAPPY...

HEY, HEY! WHAT'S HE DOING NOW?!

SPARKLE

SPARKLE

!!

!!

WHOA!!

...IT'S PERFECT

madtiger @ Instagram•Tumblr

# Swimming With Holiday Cheer

On the surface, it seemed bizarre to visit an aquarium by the cool waterfront during December. After all, most preferred the heat of summer or a light rainy spring day to occupy their time at conservation societies, finding it the perfect stage for family outings, sweetheart dates, or an opportunity to learn.

It was always a lively experience, but in the winter, it was almost lonesome to wander the outdoor grounds and stare into the empty exhibits devoid of Pokémon. A gate blocking the wooden pier with it's spiraling path that normally led to the Tynamo enclosure— where normally an instructor would carefully guide preschoolers into a lesson on how to handle the EleFish— and the frozen over pond with its Magikarp all relocated beyond the stone walls helped to emphasize the faux arctic landscape.

And yet, the promise of the cold, crisp, and chilling air had every guest pulling out their thickest fur coats and woolen mittens to attend. It wasn't a wonder as to why visitors made their way out to the Undella Town Aquarium that Sunday morning, for they all had a great love for Pokémon.

Yearly, you see, the aquarium ballroom would hold a holiday brunch themed after many of the resident Unovan Water and Ice-type Pokémon in their care.

It was an event full to the brim with amazing food, full access to the aquarium itself, and more— creating an absolutely wonderful memory for everyone of all ages to look back on fondly. Further, the proceeds went toward a charity dedicated for wildlife conservation and the care of the creatures at hand.

The venue took place in a separate building from the main premises, close at hand with an adjacent entrance that was pointed out by standing signs in order to direct guests new and old to the doors.

Opulent was an apt word to describe how it felt to enter the ballroom, crossing shiny tiled floors to ascend the marble staircase. White and blues were the color of choice, as though the frost outside had crept its way in. Despite what the interior might have led one to believe, the ballroom truly didn't charge an exorbitant price to partake in the brunch— for Unova, the price was extremely reasonable.

Despite having seen the familiar sight in the past, The Shining Beauty herself thought it was *electrifying*.

When she entered Elesa didn't rush up the stairs, taking her time as her hand hovered above the railing and her heels clacked against the steps. After all, it was only natural that she arrived fashionably late to the event with the sounds of guests and her friends to guide her ahead.

While the theme wasn't strictly confined to the resident Unovan Pokémon, it wasn't a surprise to see that the primary stars this year were Oshawott and Cubchoo, dressed in festive adornments and accessories. On highlight that Sunday were also Cryogonal who were represented by blue-dyed macramé, glass decorations designed in the shape of Frillish, and Vanillite ice sculptures to name a few.

Elesa smiled as she passed them all, heading for the check-in desk where a worker suited in blue greeted her warmly as she informed the model that her party was waiting for her inside.

The instant recognition was not due to her fame but rather because Elesa had grown to know the staff incredibly well throughout the years that the event had existed.

See, it had become something of a tradition for the Unovan League to gather in December for this brunch. At first, Elesa had been at the behest of Marlon— new to the Gym Leader circle, but ever so social— alongside her fellow current leaders, however, from there both the event and their group had grown to include nearly everyone involved in professional battling. They had all done their best to attend year after year, so she found that it was a delight, and a treat, for Elesa to get recognized for an accomplishment outside either of her two careers.

She signed the guest book in a quick script before making her way inside. Her eyes scanned the ballroom, taking note of the spread out dining tables with patrons of every walk of life chatting, eyeing the lined up buffets with servers tending to the hot by replacing the near empty trays with fresher ones and standing at attention by the customization stations.

The organizers having outdone themselves yet again, Elesa compared the scene before her to the first year— when the venue had been held outside with a long, beige canvas tent to retain the warmth from the heaters— and found that it was safe to say that it was a much appreciated glow up.

It didn't take her long to find where exactly her sweeties were considering that a loud call of, "Elesa! We're over here," caught her attention just fine.

With a smile on her face, she approached the table that held an enthusiastically waving Skyla and their fellow veteran Gym Leaders. To her right sat Drayden and beside him was Clay, with both older men engaging in a calm conversation about such riveting subjects like the price of gas and stocks. Burgh occupied himself with a box of crayons he must have snatched from the kids corner, sketching over the lined coloring book that was also intended to distract the little ones.

"Lovely to see you all again, I hope the holidays are treating you all well," she greeted, pulling off her white coat. The maroon back with its aubergine geometric patterns hid itself from view against the back of the chair, her teal knit cling sweater properly on view without the fabric to hide it. For a moment, she debated taking off her scarf too, with its Togetic inspired triangles, but ultimately decided to keep it on for now. Her earmuffs and the blonde extensions were staying, but that was a given considering how essential the look was to her personal style.

"Took you long enough!" Skyla scooted her seat over to give Elesa plenty of space to pull out her own and sit down gracefully.

"I was beginning to think that my stomach would start to eat itself if you didn't get here sooner."

"You shouldn't have waited on my part," Elesa told her.

"Oh please," Burgh put one last finishing touch on his canvas before flipping it closed. He leaned over to her and grinned. "As if Skyla would just abandon you to your lonesome like that."

"More like she wasn't willing to brave the battlefield," Clay punctuated with a jerk of his thumb over his shoulder to the shuffling buffet line, "All by herself."

"Hey!" Skyla exclaimed, pouting at the smirk that the businessman barely hid behind the rim of his wine glass as he took an all too convenient sip. "Maybe, just maybe, I was actually saving a seat for my dear friend, did you all consider that?"

"Well, were you?" Drayden challenged.

Skyla's answer was spoken with an innocent turn of her to look away, attempting as though she hadn't heard the question at all, prompting vindicated laughter from the group.

After stifling a giggle, Elesa nudged the other woman. "Come on, I ould use a buddy to accompany me up there. No shame in that at all."

"Wellll, if you insist," Skyla stuck out her tongue and scrunched her nose playfully, "I suppose I could do you a favor like that."

Even though she had just sat, Elesa was more than willing to vacate her seat now that she had taken off her winter wear and greeted everyone. As she did, she tossed a glance in the direction of the nearby tables.

It seemed almost silly to divide their whole group up into smaller categories, but the venue was more than accommodating of their request— especially since they had the records to prove how much larger their group had steadily grown over the years.

To the right of where Elesa and her group were seated were the newer— well, those who had been new at the time they started this tradition of theirs— Gym Leaders. Marlon, despite organizing the event originally, had no qualms about separating into a smaller group. He gladly sat beside Roxie decked in her tweed purple jacket and a well-dressed Cheren. The teacher had even started to bring along a plus one a few years back, one who was more than welcome to join their ever expanding party.

Elesa remembered the lovely Bianca fondly from way back when she had helped in convincing the young woman’s father to allow his daughter to follow her dream. To see the once meek and flighty girl transform into the beautiful woman dressed in white before her was exactly why Elesa loved getting to meet trainers every day, transforming dreams into reality one battle at a time.

On the left held those who had long since retired from the gym scene. Lenora and her husband, Hawes, led a conversation with an additionally retired-from-acting Brycen.

That being said, Red wouldn't blame Blue if he truly hated him now. Chili, Cress, and Cilan entertained themselves in an avid discussion that was almost certainly about the food before them, considering that every few seconds they would all pause, try something different on their plate, mull it over in their minds and mouths before returning to the subject even more enthused. The group had been brought into the fold not too long after it started becoming less of a decision made on a whim and more of a rooted league tradition.

Now the table diagonal from them, that group was an unexpected— but still not unwelcome— surprise. Grimsley and Shauntal brushed shoulders with each other as Marshall tried his best to recite a story without jostling a snoozing Caitlin from off of his shoulder.

Their Champion, Iris, had no such reservations as the young woman threw her arms into the air and kicked her legs out under the table, which garnered a wince from Grimsley, as she talked to her mentor. Alder looked good, hair streaked with gray and deeper wrinkles than last she had seen, but it was clear that life out in Floccesy Town was treating him well.

The Elite Four gathered together was partially at the hand of Caitlin, who had been told about their previous gatherings in the summer when all the girls would gather for relaxation and sunshine at her villa in Undella. Despite having a summer home there, or maybe because of that, Caitlin had missed the first few brunches but once Skyla and Elesa put it on her radar she managed to convince her peers to follow suit.

Now, how such a little thing had managed to reach the ears of the Unovan Facility Heads, Elesa had not the faintest idea.

She did, however, have a suspect in mind— one who was seated at her very table in fact.

Regardless, it made for a funny sight to have some of the region's strongest battlers all congregated together to enjoy eggs and bacon while little Oshawott and Cubchoo in blue bow ties followed at the heels of the attendants.

Elesa and Skyla headed to the beginning of the buffet, picking up the white porcelain plates from the two stacks. The spread ahead of them was a mix of playful Pokémon themed displays and the standard hot food placed in tins heated by carefully placed candles underneath, as well as an omelet station at the very end armed with two cooks fulfilling requests.

As for Elesa, instead of being daunted by the feast she started off simple by plucking one of the Cryogonal scored bread rolls with the provided tongs and dropping it onto her plate. She passed up on the little packets of butter in favor of loading her plate with fruits and berries— a healthy spread of Cheri Berries and melon, her favorites— whereas Skyla grabbed at least three.

"Better to have enough butter than to not," she commented when Elesa glanced at her.

There were very few people ahead of them and nobody behind them, so the two Gym Leaders could take all the time in the world to fill their plates before returning back to their table. Elesa appreciated the lack of a rush, as it gave her time to consider what all to put on her plate. Realistically, if she wanted more she could always go back up for a second round, so for now she'd go light on the servings.

Although she doubted that she would need to, considering she'd get her full of the afternoon with company instead of confections.

"So, how has your break been so far?" Skyla asked, making polite conversation while she waited for Elesa to get her single scoop of scrambled eggs before she could get some herself.

"Fantastic so far! I made sure to actually relax this time instead of just saying I would and then planning out the next battling season," she handed the serving ladle to Skyla. "Colette and Magnolia invited me to go shopping, but in the middle of it we were ambushed by Cody and Rolan who demanded they accompany us like a proper gentleman should."

Skyla barked out a laugh, resulting in her plate wobbling unsteadily in her grip. Thankfully, nothing fell to the ground and she successfully directed her scoop onto the landing zone. "Are you sure they didn't plan that out? It's been a while since you saw them alltogether again."

"It's possible," Elesa said with a smile. "Rolan seemed a little too smug the whole day, and you know that Magnolia can hardly keep a secret. I swear I saw her giggling in Cody's ear more than once."

While Elesa loved her current Beauties, it was nice to see her old Gym Trainers again. Lady Colette especially had grown into her own in the time when she saw her last, seemingly taking her clumsiness of almost standing on the tracks of the roller coaster when a challenger was advancing in stride and taking up an interest in a daredevil carefree attitude. It was amusing to see the posh woman brandishing her scrapes and bruises as a mark of her new extreme beauty lifestyle.

"And how has your break been?" Elesa asked in kind, moving onto the diced fried potatoes and peppers.

Skyla sighed, "I think I have to go back to the drawing board again with my gym. It seems like no matter what layout I do, this same challenger comes in and scolds me about all the safety code violations I'm making. First they lambasted my cannons and now my fans..."

She raised a brow. "Drayden *did* warn you that it was a safety hazard to have fans strong enough to blow challengers off of the platforms."

"I do *not* want to hear it from the guy who made challengers and trainers alike balance on top of dragon statues!" Skyla exclaimed. *"Anyway,* I figured it's better late than never to change things up yet again and better safe than receiving a lawsuit."

With a shake of her head at her antics, Elesa moved on to get a scoopful of sausages. Looking at her plate, she nodded and figured that she had enough for now, bypassing the omelet station so that she could return to her seat. Skyla was right behind her after popping over to a few other trays, her plate significantly more packed than Elesa's own and walking with a jovial pep in her step.

On their way back to their table, they passed behind Lenora who noticed their approach and turned in her chair to grab Elesa's hand giving it a squeeze, "You look absolutely radiant today, my dear."

"Same to you," Elesa gave her a peck on the cheek. "How has everything been? Good?"

"Much the same as normal," Lenora said. "Although, I have been in contact with some Sinnoh fossil researchers about an exhibit coming up. I can't share any details yet, but I'll make sure to send out invites when everything is finished."

"No sneak peaks at all?" Skyla teased.

"Unfortunately, I'm NDA bound so not a word will slip past these lips." Lenora mimed zipping her mouth closed.

"Well, we're looking forward to it," Elesa released her hand and gave a friendly wave at the rest of the table. "And we'll all have to catch up later."

"Sure will, Miss Elesa!" Cress exclaimed, with his brothers making sounds of agreement.

"Especially you," Elesa pointed at Brycen. "A little birdie told me that you met Valerie on the Pokéstar Studios set a while back uring her Kalos-Unova collaboration and I want all the deets."

"And 'deets' I shall provide," he promised, amused.

Punctuated with raising her plate, Skyla said, "Now, if you would excuse us, we have food to eat!"

Once she sat down, Skyla took no time at all to pick up her role and press her thumbs into the side to tear it open. In contrast to her friend, Elesa cut hers with the provided utensils after first placing her blue napkin on her lap.

"Before any of you ask and we get stuck in a loop of endless small-talk, Elesa has been having a nice break so far," Skyla stuck out her tongue in the middle of scraping butter onto her roll. The leftover golden wrappers of the first two squares she had grabbed were near her water cup, tossed to the side with reckless abandon.

"Believe me, we weren't gonna ask," Clay joked. "By this point, I'm out of anything interesting to bring up."

Drayden muttered, "I'll say..."

"Oh hush."

"I'm sure that's not true," Elesa commented.

"No it is," Burgh started before getting distracted. He leaned closer, squinting at the table across from him and snorted. "Oh, would you look at that? Shauntal is trying to play footsie with Grimsley but she keeps accidentally hitting his ankle monitor."

She threw him a look. "Do I even wanna ask?"

"Yes!" Burgh excitedly said at the same time that Skyla said a hard, "No."

"Come on," he whined, "It's funny!"

"To *you.*"

"And my opinion matters most," Burgh boasted, hand splayed against his chest and chin raised.

"You keep believing that, son," Drayden leaned over to pat him on the back.

Digging into her serving, Elesa took a moment to glance around at all of their peers. She watched the way that Cheren offered Bianca a chocolate-covered strawberry from his fork, with Roxie teasing him off to the side for doing so. The two childhood friends made for a cute pair, even if their third was absent. It was also funny to see Hawes take a page out of their book and offer Lenora a similar gesture. Elesa was just glad to find that all of their peers were enjoying themselves, an orchestra of laughter and chattering filling the ball room.

"Alright, I'm gonna pop over and give my fellow facility bosses a quick visit," Clay announced as he pushed out his chair with a throaty grunt. "Be back in just a few."

"Saving them from Benga, are you?" Skyla teased.

"Now, I wouldn't say that—" As if to prove her point, the animated boy rose from his seat and clapped his hands down onto the table, rocking it toward his side and jostling all of the dishware seated on the white cloth. Ingo rushed to grab his wine glass before it could tip over and spill, only beaten by Emmet who was just as frantic to make the catch. Leading to the both of them gripping onto the neck like a lifeline.

With just a touch of frantic energy, Clay switched tracks and said, "Yep, that's exactly what I'm doing. Excuse me now ladies, gents."

"I almost feel bad for them," Elesa commented as she watched Ingo and Emmet perk up at the sight of their fellow adult joining the table.

"I don't." Skyla snickered when Benga cajoled Clay into sitting down with them. "Serves them right for being hoity-toity about their facilities. You know, if I wanted to, I could totally make a plane based battle facility."

Leaning over from the nearby table, revealing that he had been eavesdropping unabashedly, Marlon pointed out, "Skyla, man, I love you, but if you're already having trouble designing a safe aero gym what makes you think that you could get the license to make a *facility.*"

"Hey!"

"It's a shame that the other bosses couldn't make it," Drayden wiped at his mouth with his napkin, interrupting Skyla before her and the head of their party could bicker. "I'm sure that neither of those two expected that their only company would be a young man decades younger than them."

"Were they all too busy?" Skyla asked curiously, attention stolen from Marlon who shot a thankful look at the older leader. Elesa joined her in wondering, albeit silently, as she wasn't familiar at all with the staff at the Black Tower and White Treehollow facilities.

"I heard they wanted to spend the break with their families," Burgh chimed in. They glanced at Drayden who confirmed with a nod of his head that Burgh was telling the truth.

"Oh! Yeah, that's understandable," Skyla said after swallowing a bite of her make-shift breakfast sandwich. "I plan to see my folks after so we can go out for dinner, so no round two for me."

"I might go and get an omelet just for the novelty of it," Burgh shrugged. "My canvas is full but my stomach is not."

"Burgh quick," Skyla placed her elbows on the table and leered at him. "State your omelet toppings— go."

"Mushrooms, ham, and Unovan cheese, next question."

"Ewww," she cringed. "Mushrooms? The ham and Unovan cheese I get, but not with that third component."

"Hey! You don't see me judging that monstrosity you call a sandwich!" Burgh pointed at her plate.

"What's wrong with it?" Skyla asked, indignant.

"For starters, you put marshmallow sweet potatoes on top of bacon and scrambled eggs," he crossed his arms.

"It's good!" Skyla looked at Elesa for assistance, but she put a piece of melon in her mouth to avoid speaking. "Try it!"

"No thanks, I'm good," Burgh pushed away from the table and pointed at the omelet stand. "I'll be on my way now, au revoir!"

She cupped her hands around her mouth and called out, "Coward!"

Muffling a laugh into her hand, Elesa spoke from her heart when she said, "I love that we're able to get together like this, year after year. It's not often that all of us can get together outside of work related meetings after all."

"Yeah," Skyla leaned back in her seat. "I know I tease, a *lot,* but when we're kept holed up in our gyms it can be hard to remember that we have this amazing community right at our doorstep."

Drayden crossed his arms and nodded, "Indeed. And it serves as a marker for our growth during the year." He looked over at his ward, a proud glint in his eyes.

"Plus," Elesa smiled over her glass of water, "The food is a nice bonus."

Raising her glass of orange juice, Skyla cheered, "Plus, plus! Our money is going to a good cause for once instead of just going to taxes for potholes that will allegedly get filled."

"Is that a dig at me, Skyla?" Drayden grumbled.

"I dunno, are you my mayor?"

Unable to help herself, Elesa tilted her head back and guffawed. Skyla sputtered for a second but ultimately joined her while Drayden shook his head— yet, he couldn't hide his smile behind his beard from Elesa's keen eyes. Burgh joined them not a minute after, and while he wasn't entirely sure what they were laughing about— having missed Skyla's nonsense— that didn't stop him from rolling his eyes affectionately.

The rest of the brunch was a sweeping wave of breaking bread, commiserating over particularly harsh battle losses during the year but also celebrating victorious wins with a sharp clink of champagne glasses. And it wasn't long before groups started to leave the ballroom in order to check out the exhibits but the unified Unovan eague stuck together, waiting for the slowest eaters to shovel the last bit of casserole into their mouth before jumping to their feet.

Even though they had walked through the exhibits hundreds of times before, none of them went home early. Bianca held onto Cheren's arm and excitedly shook it when they watched a show of dancing Vanillite with Brycen who gave an enthusiastic roar of applause when the Pokémon troupe performed their bows. Marlon brought Roxie along to talk to some of the caretakers, while some of the more experienced leaders idly chatted.

As for her, Elesa was more than content to trail behind her loved ones. She let Skyla drag her to exhibit after exhibit, a blue glow awash her face and lighting up those sky-blue eyes that she adored. When Clay finally escaped Benga's attention when he sought out his grandfather, followed by two exhausted Subway Bosses who quickly announced their goodbyes, he slotted easily amongst their small group once more. He took his time to read the placards with information that he could have recited from memory by now, quiet but relaxed after escaping the mess he technically sowed.

Drayden on the other hand was soon joined by an over-eager Iris who wanted to show him the Sharpedo pool, claiming that Grimsley was boring her with his 'gushing' over the creatures.

Drayden on the other hand was soon joined by an over-eager Iris who wanted to show him the Sharpedo pool, claiming that Grimsley was boring her with his 'gushing' over the creatures.

Not a soul amongst their entire party was left alone for too long, and once they did their rounds throughout the aquarium only then did they start to depart. Those with prior commitments left first, hugging and deploying kisses before separating from the group.

By the time that Elesa was bracing against the cold once more, the sky was a brilliant orange gradient on the horizon. Ahead of her were her friends, her family even. Laughing, playing, thriving all together.

For just a moment she stopped by the marbled water fountain that was situated in the wide courtyard. It was far too cold for any water to not freeze, so it was turned off until the warm weather was welcomed by spring. That didn't stop her from approaching, gloved hands falling flat on the stone as she glanced up at the statue of a Samurott with its snout pointed upwards and the surrounding Dewott and Oshawott at its side.

It would have been too childish— and a hassle on the staff's part— for her to open her coin purse and throw a Poké into the drained fountain for a measly wish. She knew this, but still Elesa got one out to press against her lips.

She whispered a quick ask for good fortune, sent out into the universe— For a year of great battling and for the continued safety and ensured happiness of all her loved ones.

And when Elesa left, it was with an assurance that she would come see that fountain again next year and leave yet another coin on the wall with even greater memories to treasure.

"Swimming With Holiday Cheer"

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# Merry Mishaps

Icy winds from the top of Mount Coronet swept across the Sinnoh Region, carrying winter's frosty bite within them. From the mountains bordering Celestic Town northward to the icelands, the perpetual snow-covered landscape was already a total whiteout.

The warmer coastlands — Veilstone to Sunnyshore — could not escape the freeze as flurries danced in the gray cloud-filled skies overhead. The native amphibian and reptilian Pokémon living in the marshes of Pastoria had hidden away from the cold to await spring's thaw.

Further to the west, crossing the mountains into the plains — Eterna and south to Twinleaf — a wintery quilt blanketed the land.

It seemed like it'd been only a few days since a trio of Trainers had gotten their Pokémon and set off on their journey. Yet, time had flown from an adventure filled with excitement, danger, plenty of Pokémon battles, and rookie mistakes.

Barry, Dawn, and Lucas had gotten a late start leaving on their journeys.

The five months of their travels allowed them to see Hearthome City before the harsh winter forced them to return home to wait out the worst of the annual freeze.

A minor setback was not going to stop them. Not when Barry and Dawn made it a point to meet up with Lucas down at the beach of Sandgem Town at every opportunity to train their growing teams.

While they had met early that morning, they weren't training.

Instead, the trio spent their time together doing last-minute Christmas shopping before getting lunch. Afterward, they temporarily split up for independent shopping until meeting at their agreed-upon time at the southern entrance to Jubilife City.

Barry grew antsy at the prospect of staying still for too long. Even if too long was determined by his measurement of time and not that of a clock.

Dawn and Lucas had barely arrived before Barry darted off ahead down Route 202, shouting over his shoulder that he'd 'fine his friends Ten-Million if they're late'. His silhouette gradually faded as he left his friends where they stood in the snow beneath an illuminated lamppost.

"There he goes," Dawn muttered with a sigh.

"Is he always like that?" Lucas asked with disbelief, his brow furrow only deepening when Dawn nodded.

"He'll get to Sandgem Town and realize that we're not racing him and then either come back to tell us to hurry up or stand there stubbornly to wait on us," Dawn added with a laugh. "He really hasn't changed at all."

"I guess that means we better catch up," Lucas replied.

"Probably so," Dawn agreed as she and Lucas settled on a comfortable jog. The snow crunched beneath their shoes as they moved, passing trees and leaping down the ledges to avoid the tall patches of grass.

They expected to run into Barry upon returning to Sandgem Town. They were unsurprised to see him standing under a street light with his arms crossed. However, Professor Rowan being there was a surprise. Before they could ask, the professor spoke, "Good, the three of you are here now."

Dawn couldn't help but marvel at the way Professor Rowan was able to command the attention of everyone who surrounded him. Everything about him was awe-inspiring, and she wished that someday she could emulate him, even a little.

"You three," The professor announced unceremoniously before pausing, hands clasped behind his back as he looked the trainers over.

"Is something wrong, Professor?" Lucas asked worriedly, face marred with concern. He visibly relaxed with relief as the researcher shook his head.

Initially, Dawn found the way the professor would stand quietly deliberating what he would say uncanny, but Lucas told her the professor had been like that as long as he'd known him. She no longer found it unsettling and immensely enjoyed visiting with the professor. He was full of helpful information and advice on raising her team or where to find a Pokémon she was looking for.

Before the silence could continue, the professor continued in his usual abrupt way. "Meet in the lab tomorrow. I have something for you."

"Something for us?" Barry blurted out excitedly, bouncing in place as his shoes tapped on the pavement. "Why didn't you say so instead of standing there staring at me? I could have run back and told Slowbro and Slowking for you!"

"Because you would have dashed off with the word something and not have all the information," the professor replied. His tone was admonishing but not unkind.

Professor Rowan had a point. They all knew it. Dawn could tell by how Barry sulked sourly that he didn't like it.

"How are you doing today, Professor?" Dawn asked instead, with a smile.

"I am well, Dawn," he replied gently before clearing his throat. "As I was saying, I have something for the three of you. Let's meet in my lab tomorrow. While you are there, I'd also like to look at the Pokémon you received."

"Of course."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll be the first one there and fine them for being late!"

The trainers replied together as a harsh wind ripped through the trees, the sway of the branches sent powdery snow flying, and the bite of the chill was bone-nipping as the sun continued to slip below the horizon. The shadows' reach in the snow continued to grow ever longer.

The streetlights had started coming on when they left Jubilife City, but Dawn hadn't realized they'd been gone that long.

The professor paused before giving them a gentle crinkle of his eyes when he spoke again, "Lucas, enjoy the rest of your evening," he said with a nod to his full-time assistant before turning to Dawn and Barry, "Your parents will be looking for you at this hour. It's best that you head home."

The wind continued to pick up, and even Professor Rowan took a moment to cross his arms — the temperature would only drop even more rapidly. "You two be safe getting home."

"We will," Barry promised solemnly… before he got ready to dash.

"We'll see you in the morning, Professor, you as well, Lucas!" Dawn added as the Professor and Lucas bid them goodbye after a promise to exchange the gifts they'd spent the day shopping for.

*All in all, it's been a successful day,* Dawn mused as she and Barry made their way back to Twinleaf Town — or, more accurately — Barry had a one-sided race with her back to Twinleaf Town.

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The night passed quickly, bringing with it a fresh dusting of snow that masked all signs of the previous day's activities.
A quick jaunt through the snow-covered Route 201 had Dawn and Barry arriving in Sandgem Town within an hour. Their liberal use of Repel ensured they would not encounter wild Pokémon to delay their excitement further.

It was not hard to spot Lucas standing just outside the lab, awaiting his friends. He waved wildly when he saw them and quickly ushered them inside. Professor Rowan's lab was warm and cozy compared to the frigid temperatures outside.

While not completely decked out with holiday cheer, a tree was in the corner of the entryway.

The tree itself was clearly the lovechild of someone who adored the holidays and wanted a full tree, a stubborn traditionalist who wanted a cohesive theme, and someone with a sense of humor.

It was adorned with twinkling multicolor lights and popcorn garland. The ornaments ranged from decades-old keepsakes to store-bought plastic ones covered in glitter. Staplers, tape dispensers, letter openers, and various office supplies were nestled in the branches added in as an afterthought. Any extra space was filled with candy canes and faux clip-in Gracidea flowers.

However, a tree would only be complete with a topper.

Sitting proudly atop the brand-new flock-covered tree was a gaudy, mostly faded gold tinsel-wrapped star with only half of the lights working. The star was obviously older than all of the decorations combined.

It was nonsensical and almost out of place with the atmosphere of the professor's lab, yet still quaint and felt like it embodied the personalities of everyone who worked there in the cheesiest way possible.

"Before we get any further," the professor began, "let me see the Pokémon I gave you at the start of your journey."

The trainers let their Pokémon out of their Pokéballs at the professor's request.

With a well-practiced eye, he observed the Pokémon. Though he couldn't communicate directly with them, sixty years of experience taught him a thing or two.

The Pokémon he'd given Lucas — Chimchar — and the other two that he'd allowed Dawn and Barry to keep — Piplup and Turtwig, respectively — had grown significantly during the time with their human companions. He was looking at three very different Pokémon that had once spent their days in his lab, running around and causing chaos with their play.

Professor Rowan found himself musing how things had been before he'd give his protégés their Pokémon. Trainers and Pokémon alike complimented one another in the best way.

The professor believed they would go far with hard work, love, and dedication. Each of the three trainers had a rare talent that he saw once a generation.

Turtwig had always been the calmest of the three, preferring to keep to himself and enjoying a slower tempo. The professor couldn't help but stifle a huff of a laugh at the irony that the high-strung and always on-the-move Barry was partnered with Turtwig.

Chimchar's short attention span had her wandering about and nosing through every nook and cranny that looked vaguely interesting. Professor Rowan was glad that usually by-the-book Lucas was paired with her. She needed stability, and a little monkey business from time to time would help get Lucas out of his shell.

Piplup was prideful, arrogant even. As a species, they were notorious for being difficult to train and bond with because of their pride. The Professor knew from several phone calls with Dawn that she had her hands full with Piplup's personality. But, given that she had a solid and determined spirit of her own, he was sure they'd find a way to compromise in the end.

Even though the fledgling Trainers had not had their Pokémon very long, Professor Rowan was impressed with what he saw as he observed their growth together. He was satisfied that his initial feelings about the young trainers had been proven correct.

After a soft hum, Professor Rowan turned to the Trainers, "You three, come with me. I have something for you."

He smiled as he heard their footsteps tapping on the tile as they followed him down the hallway. Their hushed whispers were not subtle, but their excitement was contagious.

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At first, the trio of Pokémon were content to simply be as they enjoyed once again being in each other's company. It had been many months since they'd all been together in the lab, and occasionally, meeting on the road with their trainers was different.

Turtwig lay comfortably under a chair nearest the heater, dozing while his friends amused themselves.

Piplup shuffled the presents under the tree in every way, always wanting more from his new placements. His occasional chirps were the only vocal expression of his displeasure as the positioning of the boxes did not meet his impeckable standards.

Chimchar had taken from hopping from the floor into a chair and, from there, onto the desk. She spied one of the many nearby bookshelves that offered to climb to new heights. The research, theories, and scholarly journals that lined the shelves weren't interesting anyway.

Chimchar continued jumping from desk to shelf and back down, growing more confident with each leap — at least, until she got a little too confident with a jump that had her nearly falling off the shelf.

She barely caught herself on the edge, her feet dangling freely for a terrifying heartbeat before she pulled herself to safety.

Seconds later, with a soft coo, she was ready to resume running across the wooden surface as Piplup continued to shuffle boxes below.

Emboldened by her quick save, Chimchar sped up as she approached the edge of the shelf.

She leaped from the shelf to the top of the tree, the pads of her feet pushed off the wood. Her target: the tree. Weightlessly soaring across the small space was euphoric.

Her targeted landing spot grew closer.

Closer. Closer. Closer.

*Contact!*

The artificial tree seemed to sway ever so slightly, but held firm and stayed upright. (It was *probably* fine.) Piplup let out a squawk of indignation as a tape dispenser that had been dislodged landed on the tile before him.

Chimchar uttered a series of chirps in apology as she jumped from the tree back to the bookshelf. How fun it had been to "fly" across the room. An idea formed in her head as she scurried back to the flat top of the shelf and ran along it to the far back wall.

The commotion startled Turtwig enough that he opened one eye to see what his friends were getting up to. It was sure to be interesting with all the noise they were making.

Chimchar chittered at him as she continued to scurry on the shelving overhead. While Piplup continued to shuffle the presents around, Turtwig was willing to leave his warm spot by the heater.

After a stretch accompanied by a huge yawn, Turtwig forced himself to his feet and trotted across the floor to join Piplup.

Turtwig interpreted the angry squawk his aquatic friend let out as a cry for help. Surely, Piplup would like the help — he'd been shuffling boxes since before he'd dozed off!

Turtwig had an idea, and a short series of clicks directed to Chimchar had her bounding her way back across the tops of the shelves. She could help too!

Chimchar's exciting cooing matched the thumping of her quadrupedal steps as she moved faster, faster, *faster.* The edge of the last shelf grew closer, closer, *closer.*

Chimchar gave a mighty leap as she reached the end and sailed through the air toward the tree. It had caught her once before and would do the same again. Then, she could scurry down, join her friends, and help get the presents sorted! Their trainers would be so happy!

Chimchar landed at the top of the tree, clutching the artificial branches tightly to steady herself. She'd flown faster than anticipated, and the tree swayed a little too close to the wall.

Something didn't feel right for Piplup and Turtwig.

"PIP???"

"TWIG??"

It felt as if something behind them moved?

Teetering. Tottering.

"CHIM???"

Tottering. Teetering.

"CHA????"

Time seemed to stand still momentarily as if the tree would stabilize itself.

However, it was not meant to be.

Down fell the tree, hitting the cold tile of the laboratory floor with a mighty CRASH!

The demented symphony of several ornaments breaking upon impact and hard staplers slamming against the tile startled the young Pokémon, who joined the chorus in a triage of clicking, screeching, and screaming as the three were blanketed by prickly faux needles as a powdery cloud of flock filled the air.

A deafening silence followed that lasted for a few heartbeats — and then, a rip-roaring burst of Pokémon-created pandemonium fell upon the room.

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Professor Rowan led the trainers to the back of his lab; Dawn felt a sense of déjà vu returning to the place where the professor had allowed her to keep Piplup and given her her Pokédex.

Nothing about the spacious room with various equipment had changed since she'd last been there. Still, she watched with bated breath as the professor gestured to the long table that sat notably off to the side.

On it were three boxes. Pink, red, and orange. It wasn't hard to figure out each intended recipient.

"Professor…?" Lucas spoke up timidly. The silent "What's this?" filled the space.

The professor looked over them with the familiar stern gaze that seemed to look through them. Dawn marveled at how the professor seemed to be able to read someone so thoroughly. Despite the intense gaze that the trainers were locked in, there was no mistaking the slight crinkle at the corners of his eyes and an upward turn of his lips nearly hidden by his mustache.

"You three have done nothing but splendid work since you set off," Rowan began. "Only five months ago, the three of you left this lab with three young Pokémon who had yet to experience life outside. In many ways, they were much like you. Young, wide-eyed, full of promise and dreams.

Your partners are young — as are you — but they have matured substantially under your direction in the five months they've been in your care. The way they adore you is telling.

"I hardly recognize them as the mischief makers that would run amuck in my lab," he added with a gruff chuckle. After a brief pause, he cleared his throat. He changed the topic, "I wanted to give you a token of my appreciation for the work you are putting into my research and wish you all a Merry Christmas."

Dawn unconsciously straightened her back at the praise. Out of the corner of her eye, her friends had done the same. High praise from such an esteemed man was not to be taken lightly.

With a nod, the professor gestured to the table, beckoning the Trainers forward to take their gifts. The ever-so-slight twinkle in his eyes betrayed his excitement as he nodded at them — it would have been akin to a kid at Christmas had his expression not been stoic.

But the excitement of the surprise got the better of the teenagers as they began opening the neatly wrapped gifts. It didn't matter that they had all received the same thing, slight variations aside — in his position, he could not show favoritism to one over the other after all.

Barry had taken to tapping his feet, shuffling in place in his impatience — surprises were meant to be shared pronto — Dawn felt as if she could have read his mind.

Lucas seemed to lean forward, hanging on every word as Professor Rowan presented their presents to them. With excited murmuring and chatter, they learned they were each given the perfect gift.

Their boxes were identical, containing TMs with moves fit for their partners and a gift basket containing items valuable on their journey — Potions, Pokéballs, and the like. Gear was a treasure in the wilderness.

"Oh! This is awesome!" Barry exclaimed loudly, tearing the paper with excited vigor.

"Professor! Thank you!" Lucas chimed in as he consciously tried to avoid making a mess of his gifted package.

Exciting as the survival pack was, the far more exciting gift was at the bottom of the neatly wrapped box.

The Pokétch Company had recently developed switchable wristbands for their watches, which were currently high-dollar store items.

The Professor noted the colors the trainers often wore and ensured they could change the wristbands accordingly.

Barry had been talking nonstop about being able to change out the band, and Lucas used his Pokétch for its features religiously.

Dawn was especially thrilled with the prospect. She'd been interested in accessorizing for contests when she felt the urge to compete.

"This is wonderful! Thank you so much!" she exclaimed, unable to stop herself from stepping forward to throw her arms around the professor in a hug — one that Barry joined, followed by Lucas after half a heartbeat's hesitation.

At first, there was a collective stunned hush that filled the room that soon turned into a burst of excited chatter and profuse thank you's that continued — and thanks to Barry in particular, grew only louder and louder — until a distinctively loud CRASH that came from another room interrupted them.

A room that they may have left three Pokémon unattended in.

***

*Silence.*

Pieces of broken ornaments lay strewn across the floor. Tiny particles from the flock continued to flutter to the floor like snow that sparkled in the lighting. A layer of white dust and glitter covered the furniture and the tile.

Chimchar took off across the room in a panicked dash. The gaudy old star was stuck on her head like a crown while a long strand of lights attached to the star trailed along behind her like a streamer.

Turtwig found himself securely lodged beneath the tree's base and the now-crushed presents. The combination of the tree's weight and the silky tree skirt between Turtwig and the tile left him unable to find any traction to help himself. He let out a distressed series of clicks as he could not do much except slide the skirt around the floor with his feet in a motion reminiscent of swimming.

Turtwig's clicks were drowned out by Piplup's mighty squawk as he wiggled free of the faux tree's prickly needles holding him hostage. However, he hadn't a moment to celebrate his achievement as Chimchar's panicked run ended abruptly when she collided with Piplup.

The fire and water duo rolled across the glittered-covered floor and landed in a tangled heap of unlit lights and dazed bodies against the nearby wall.

Still unable to move more than his frantic wiggling, Turtwig helplessly cried out in distress for his friends.

Chimchar recovered first and began wiggling around, getting herself to her feet with Piplup strapped to her back. A part of the star's tinsel tickled his beak, causing Piplup to release a mighty-for-his-size sneeze.

Which, of course, set off another round of chaos as a startled Chimchar shrieked as she tried to run away from the loud squawking in her ears. Her unwilling passenger squawked and chirped indignantly, flailing about, causing her to struggle to keep her balance.

Annoyed by the extra weight that prevented her from running fast, she flailed about in retaliation, trying to knock the excess weight off her back. The struggles of primate and penguin only further entangled them in the strand of lights that bound them together.

From where he was pinned beneath the tree, Turtwig let out a helpless series of clicks that fell upon the deaf ears of his much louder companions.

Chimchar managed a few steps that left glittery primate-shaped footprints in her wake before she tripped over the end of the strand of lights and landed squarely on her stomach face-first into the tree with an angry Piplup wiggling on top of her.

The trio of grass, water, and fire continued their hopeless wiggling to free themselves… with no such luck. Those darn sticky branches!

Turtwig could not mediate his friends as Piplup and Chimchar's bickering escalated.

But then, the trio of Pokémon froze as the door suddenly flew open, and an all-too-familiar stern voice filled the room.

"That is quite enough of that."

***

As always, the Professor's commanding presence took charge of the room in chaos. Dawn, Lucas, and Barry were horrified that their Pokémon had made such a mess and the Pokémon had gone ramrod straight; however, despite the absolute wreck of the room, the professor was surprisingly sanguine about the situation as he arched an eyebrow.

"I suppose you three wouldn't be yourselves if you didn't cause *any* mischief at all," he addressed the Pokémon as their trainers rushed to help.

"Professor, we are so sorry," Lucas said, mortified.

"Seriously, we'll clean this up," Dawn continued, willing the ground to open beneath her feet and swallow her whole.

"Yeah, what they said," Barry finished awkwardly, turning nearly as red as Lucas' hat.

But the professor put up a hand in reply as if to wave their apologies away. With a shake of his head, he spoke again, "It won't take very long to clean up, and no one was hurt, and what are the holidays without a few Merry Mishaps along the way?"

At first, the single question going through Trainers' minds hung in he air – Did the professor just make a joke?

But then, Barry let out a laugh, then a snort, and then doubled over in loud, from-the-belly-laughter, which set Dawn into a series of giggles and spiraled into Lucas joining as chirps and coos from the Pokémon filled in as well. The professor's smile told all.

Merry Mishaps Indeed.

"Merry Mishaps"

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# Gingerbread & Paper Lanterns

Akari pulls her jacket tight around her as she steps outside, smiling even as a gust of wind washes over her. A thin layer of snow blankets the world, crunching under her feet and decorating the trees and rooftops in a layer of perfect calm. Despite the chill, the camp is just as lively with people and Pokémon as ever, and one of Akari's current partners bounds over as soon as she's out the door.

"Hey, buddy!" she smiles, kneeling down to greet her Flareon. "Come to keep me warm?"

She picks him up, noting how much heavier the young Pokémon has gotten, and holds him close to her chest. He's much warmer than the world around him, and she buries her face in his fur. "You're getting big, aren't you?" Even walking around with him in her arms feels awkward, like she might topple over if she isn't careful. "I'll have to get stronger if I want to keep carrying you around!"

He squirms out of her arms on her way into town, bounding off and leaving tracks through the snow. Everyone looks busy, running about giving orders or setting up decorations or sitting at tables folding lanterns out of red paper.

Curious, she watches everyone hard at work, and soon finds Rei helping Professor Laventon carry a large table towards Jubilife's town center.

"What's going on?" She hurries over to the two of them, grabbing the table's side to help them along.

"You haven't heard?" Laventon asks.

"She's spending all her time doing research. I'd be surprised if she knows what day it is," Rei teases.

"It's the 20th," Akari informs him.

"...It's the 21st."

"And more notably, the shortest day of the year!" Laventon adds, then chuckles. "Sometimes I forget your memories only go back a couple months. This would be your first solstice, then!"

"I guess so."

"It's so much fun," Rei says, a broad smile crossing his face. They set the table down and he stretches his arms out. "People sing songs and we all have this huge feast, and at night we float lanterns out over the water. It's amazing, you're going to love it."

Akari looks around, smiling. There are decorations set up outside shops and houses, kids from both clans running around, the scent of baked goods wafting through the air.

It tugs at something deep in her memory, inaccessible but undeniably stored away somewhere. “It feels familiar.” Her eyes linger on an older couple, looking fondly at each other as they talk over warm drinks. “I wonder if we had something like this back where I came from.”

“I should hope so,” Laventon says. “I’d hate to think that we don’t have celebrations in the future.”

Unfortunately, not everyone is in such high spirits. The sounds of an argument rise from near the gate, voices far too aggressive to be a simple dispute about decorations. Akari hurries over, both Rei and her Flareon following after, and find the far too familiar sight of Adaman and Irida having an argument.

“I just can’t believe you would do this, today of all days,” Irida shouts, face turning red. “This is a new low, even for you.”

“There’s nothing to believe,” Adaman insists. “You seriously think anyone in my clan would go that far? You’re in another reality. Back off before you cause a scene.”

“How do you expect me to back off?” She looks positively on the brink of exploding. “You stole our Pokémon!”

Rei hurries over before anything can escalate further, Akari right behind him. “Hey, hey, what’s going on?”

“This one,” Adaman says, talking over Irida, “wasn’t paying enough attention, and her Pokémon ran off. Now she wants to pin it on me.”

“Don’t try and turn this around!”

“Enough,” Akari says, surprised by the weight in her voice.

“This is a celebration. If there’s a problem, you can take it up with the captain, or go settle it elsewhere.”

“But—” Irida starts. Akari cuts her off.

“What Pokémon are you looking for?”

“It’s that rare Vulpix we found in the Icelands. The white one that liked the cold.”

“Okay. Rei and I will go looking for it. If it ran off, it probably went back home. And you should let the captain know she’s missing. If she’s still around Jubilife, we’ll have people on the lookout for her.”

“And if she really was stolen?” Irida casts an accusing look at Adaman.

Rei steps forward before he can retort. “Adaman, go ask around the Diamond Clan to see if anyone’s seen anything.”

“But—”

He holds up his hand. “This is the first time both clans are celebrating together. I’m sure you both want it to go well?”

Akari's surprised at the way he stares both of them down, and crosses her arms to try and add to the effect.

"Fine," Adaman concedes. "If she backs off of me, I'll ask around."

Irida's angry bluster falls away as he walks off, her expression shifting to reveal the anxiety beneath. Akari sighs, and places a hand on her shoulder. "Take a breather, get something to eat. If we work together, we'll find her."

***

Akari hides her face behind her scarf, feeling the brutal winds of the Icelands wash over her. She and Rei ride Ursaluna together, his fur radiating much needed warmth, while Flareon and Glaceon run alongside them completely unbothered. It's starting to snow again, gray clouds covering the sky and dulling the sharp white of the snowy ground.

"I'm worried," Rei admits, speaking up over the wind.

"Really? Ursa's on the scent, we'll find her."

"Not about that. This is the first year the clans have been on good terms with each other, but if putting them together like this means they keep fighting..." he trails off. "Maybe it was too soon."

"Maybe," Akari agrees. She turns her head up, squinting into the bright clouds, and sticks her tongue out to try and catch a snowflake.

"And I want to believe it'll turn out okay, but if the leaders are fighting like that, then I can only imagine everyone else will follow their lead. Are you even listening to me?"

She puts her tongue back in her mouth. "I'm listening. But what are we going to do about it, send everyone home?"

"I guess not."

"Exactly. All we can do is keep everyone as calm as we can." She buries her gloved fingers in Ursaluna's fur, trying to keep them warm, and looks out over the pearly white landscape. "Ooh, Rei, look!"

Off in the distance a Mamoswine leads its pack across the snowy valley, well over a dozen Swinubs following close behind. *"That's* a Mamoswine?" Rei asks. "It's huge! Its tusks are huge! You caught one of those?"

"They're actually really docile!" Frigid as it is, the deep cold seems to fade away as she watches the Pokémon around her. "Once we find Vulpix, you should go say hi to one."

"I'm good," he says, shifting behind her. "It's kinda scary out here. This is one of the least hospitable places in Hisui, and so many Pokémon walk around like it's nothing."

"Really? I love it out here." Akari watches Flareon bound over to what looks like a snow-covered bush, sniffing it curiously, only to jump away in a panic when it shifts and opens its eyes.

She only feels a little bad for laughing at him, her breath turning to mist in the cold. “Tell me more about the solstice?”

Ursaluna walks along the edge of a cliff, and Akari brushes some of the snow off her jacket. “It’s a lot bigger this year than usual. Cyllene and Kamado aren’t the most festive people, if you couldn’t tell. Usually we end up with a smaller celebration, which is nice, but nothing like what we’d have back home.”

“And the only reason it’s big this year is because of the clans, I take it?”

“Yeah,” he sighs. “Kinda takes the fun out of it, knowing how pragmatic it is. Still, I guess we don’t need to look a gift Rapidash in the mouth.”

“Maybe they’ll like celebrating more after today goes well?” Akari suggests.

Even though he’s behind her, she can tell he’s looking at her weird. “Despite everything that happened, you’re still the most optimistic person I know.”

Ursaluna sniffs around the entrance to a cave, then continues on past it. A small Zubat flock flutters out of the cave, startling Rei and making Akari laugh.

“What about you?” Rei asks. “Do you remember anything about the holidays back home?”

“I…” she starts, turning up to stare at the sky.

The clouds are a wall of solid gray made fuzzy by the mild snowfall, and her memories feel exactly the same. “No, there’s still nothing, but I feel like they have to be in there. It feels so familiar, and I’m excited about it. But when I try to reach for it, there’s nothing there. It’s like when you wake up from a dream and everything fades away.”

“Sorry. I shouldn’t push.”

Akari shrugs. “It’s okay. I’ve never known anything else.” Ursaluna turns into another cave, shifting to signal Akari and Rei to get off. Akari lands gracefully in the snow with practiced ease, and watches Rei struggle to dismount. “She’s in here?” he asks, looking uneasily into the cave.

“Seems like it!” Akari calls Flareon and Glaceon over, and they both bound happily along. “Looks like there’s some kind of light up ahead, but there’s no fire types around here… maybe an Electabuzz? I know I’ve seen a few of those.”

“I’m going to walk behind you.”

She leads them into the cave, glancing around for any aggressive Pokémon, but no one seems particularly interested in a battle. A Glalie floats past her, leaving a trail of frigid vapor in its wake, and Akari resists the urge to reach out and touch the Pokémon. “Gosh, it’s so beautiful in here.”

“If your propensity to run into caves and approach wild Pokémon isn’t a symptom of your amnesia, I’m surprised you lived long enough to lose your memory in the first place.”

"You worry too much." She turns around as she walks, tilting her head up to look at the frost-covered stalactites shining in the dim light.

"Okay, at least look in front of you while you walk."

Akari walks backwards for a moment to stick her tongue out at him, then turns back to face the rest of the cave. "That's definitely a campfire up ahead. Can't see if there's anyone there, though."

Rei steps a little closer to Akari, as if hiding behind her would keep him safe. She hardly minds it, even if it's a little silly to be scared of anything in this cave. "Who would pick this cave for a campout?"

"Dunno! Let's see." She takes a deep breath, and projects her voice back into the cave. "Helloooo? Anyone in here?" Her voice echoes off the wall, sending a flock of Zubat roosting on the ceiling into a squeaking flurry.

"Pipe down back there," someone calls back.

"Sorry." Akari picks up the pace, taking long strides through the cave to see who exactly is waiting for them and summoning all the willpower she can muster to not be distracted by a Zorua sleeping nearby. They step into a wider cavern lit by a crackling campfire, and quickly find the source of the voice. "Oh, Ingo!" Akari's smile brightens, but Rei tries once again to hide behind her.

"The Zubat get riled up from loud noises," he says, remaining seated on the ground. "Then that gets this poor thing here all scared."

Akari notices a Pokémon swaddled in Ingo's lap, hidden by the dark fabric of his coat. Rei's Glaceon bounds over to investigate, Akari not far behind.

"Who do you have there? I might be able to help — oh!" The Pokémon sticks her head out at Akari's voice, bright cyan eyes peering at her through a furry white face like small pockets of sky on a cloudy day. "Hi, Vulpix! Did you have her this entire time?"

"Jubilife seemed to be a bit much for her, and ran off. Didn't seem like anyone noticed, so I tracked her to the Icelands and let her go where she needed to go to calm down."

"Well, I'm glad she's in good hands." Akari sits down across from Ingo, while Rei's Glaceon rubs her face up against Vulpix's. "But everyone's so worried! Irida and Adaman were at each other's throats again, and we could only calm them down by promising to go looking."

"Well, they can both relax now," he says, brushing his gloved fingers through her mane. "She's fine, just needs to spend the night somewhere quieter."

"Do you think she's feeling better enough to come back?" Akari asks. "I'm sure seeing that she's okay will help everyone calm down."

He shakes his head. "I'm gonna give her some time. Everyone's been poking and prodding and studying this one since we found her. If she wants to run off and hide in a cave, I'm not dragging her out until she's ready to go on her own. That one can go let everyone know she's okay," he says, pointing to Rei.

"Just me?"

"Akari dawdles. I asked her to deliver a package once. Before she was even out of my sight, she got distracted by a swarm of Combee and ran off in the opposite direction."

She opens her mouth to protest, but she can't deny the allegations.

"Fair point," Rei concedes. "I'll try and get everyone calmed down. See you later, Akari." He calls Glaceon back to his side, and the two hurry back out through the cave.

"Here, hold onto her for a second." Ingo hands the Vulpix over to Akari, who squirms a little but doesn't wriggle out of her arms. "I'm too old to be sitting on a hard floor like this," he says, shifting ositions so he can stretch his legs out.

"She's so small," Akari says, as she's plenty young enough to sit on the ground without issue. "She couldn't be younger than a few months, right?"

"Can't assume much just because she's smaller than the usual breed of Vulpix, but she sure acts like a kit. Makes you wonder what separated her from her parents though."

She looks down at the Pokémon, who rests her head on Akari's arm to look up at Ingo. "Aww, it's ok, baby. I'm away from my family for the holidays too." The instinct to kiss its forehead passes over her, but she's long since learned her lesson about putting her face too close to ice types. "Ingo, are you coming to the celebration tonight?"

"I wanted to talk to you about that," he says, sitting up straight. He usually sounds serious enough, but now there's a particular weight to his voice. "This is your first year here, but I've been around this track a few times. This is always the hardest time of the year."

"What do you mean?" she frowns.

"You get homesick?"

"Kind of." Vulpix starts squirming in her arms, so she sets her down and watches her trot back over to Ingo. "I don't think it's really the same, I can't even remember what I'm missing."

"No," he agrees. "But you get that feeling, where you're certain you left something behind. That there's people back home who miss you."

She crosses her arms, not just because she's cold. "Yeah."

"It's always been the worst during the holidays. It's not that I don't feel at home in the Pearl Clan, even if we don't see eye to eye all the time. But this time of year only makes me feel like an outsider."

"I'm sorry," Akari says. She pulls her Flareon closer to her, combing her fingers through his fur. "Are you just... going to sit in this cave all night?"

He chuckles. "No, no. There's plenty I can be doing back over in Coronet. I am still the warden, after all."

Her brow furrows in concern. “You’re really going to spend the solstice alone?”

“I’ll have my Pokémon with me,” he assures her. “Besides, I’ve found it’s nicer to feel alone by yourself than feel alone with everyone else.”

She wonders if she ever felt that way, back in her old life.

“And I wanted to extend the invitation to you,” he continues. “If you’d like to avoid that homesickness. Should be a lot of Ghost types out tonight, I know you’re fond of those folk.”

The thought isn’t too bad. Quiet time out in the wild, helping out with warden work would be more than inviting on most nights. But she shakes her head. “I don’t think so, sorry. I want to see the celebration with everyone, even if it makes me homesick. I’d rather be happy and sad than not feel anything at all.”

“Fair enough,” he nods, absentmindedly picking the Vulpix back up into his lap. “If you do ever need a moment, you’ll know where to find me.”

“Thank you,” she says, and gets to her feet. “And I really would like to see you in Jubilife. Even if it’s just for a little bit.”

“I wouldn’t wait up,” he says, then after a pause, he adds, “But I appreciate the thought.”

***

“He’s really just gonna miss the whole thing?” Rei asks.

“That’s what he said.” The two of them sit at one of the tables outside The Wallflower, sipping warm tea as they watch the crowds. Akari’s pleasantly surprised to see that the tables are far more mixed than she expected, Expedition Team members sitting with those from the Pearl Clan sitting with those from the Diamond Clan. The smell of cooked meats and roasted vegetables and sweet desserts waft all through the village along with the sounds of music and dancing, all lit by paper lanterns hung along every building.

“I can’t imagine,” he says, shaking his head. “Is that how you’re feeling?”

She pauses, taking the time to look inward. “I don’t think so. Not yet, anyway. I’m just…” she looks out over the crowd, and smiles when she sees a teenager from the Diamond Clan dancing with a new friend from the Pearl Clan. “I’m grateful to be here.”

“I’m glad you’re here too,” Rei says, with a smile even warmer than the tea. “C’mon, let’s get some food.”

They walk over to one of the tables, maneuvering their way through the vibrant crowd. “I’m so glad everyone calmed down,” Akari says. “Were they totally at each other’s throats when you got back?”

“It was a little tense, but not as bad as I thought. I think Adaman realized that Irida was panicking and didn’t actually think anyone stole anything, and he was even helping her look. She was so relieved once I told her what happened, though. I don’t think she’d have stuck around to celebrate if we couldn’t find her.”

"See? We saved the holiday," Akari grins. They each take a plate, piling them high with food, and Akari helps herself to her fair share of warm cookies. "These smell so good, I—"

Her sentence is cut off by a wave of nostalgia, strong enough it almost knocks her over. The cookies in her hand smell of cinnamon and ginger, and in that moment she's certain she's had them before, back in a life she can't remember.

"Hey, Akari?" Rei waves his hand in front of her face, snapping her back to the real world. She feels off balance and can't shake the feeling of something snared in her heart. "You okay? You spaced out there."

"I'm fine," she says, trying to plaster on a smile. Her lips cooperate but her eyes must give her away, because Rei's concern only deepens. "I... I think I know what Ingo meant now."

"Let's sit down," he says, already guiding her to an open table. "What happened?"

She sits down, taking a deep breath to try and shake off the isorientation. "Someone in my family made these once," she blurts. "I don't know who, or their names or even what they looked like," Even though her mind is working overtime to try and remember any of it, "But someone made these for me before."

"Do you, um," he starts, clearly struggling to figure out what to say. "What do you need?"

The words *to go home* almost slip from her, and she feels guilty even for thinking it. She is home, surrounded by the only people she knows of as family. But the fog over her memories drives her crazy, and these little peeks through only make it worse.

At a loss for what to say, she picks up one of the cookies and brings it almost to her lips, inhaling deeply.

Just for a second, she remembers.

She recalls her hand — *much smaller, but certainly hers — reaching for a plate of cookies cut perfectly into different shapes, colorful icing coating them in a layer of thick sugar. It's past sunset, but the kitchen is bright enough that she hardly notices how dark it is outside, soft light shining over her and her family.*

*The cookies smell like cinnamon and ginger. She bounces in her seat as she brings it to her lips, feeling the slick icing under her fingers. Next to her, a girl her age giggles with delight at someone's joke, the kind of high, unrestrained laugh that can only come from a truly elated child. An older woman chuckles along with them, with deep smile lines around her eyes and gray hair tied in a braid.*

*Her eyes are strikingly silver, so similar to Akari's it's like looking i n a mirror, and her laugh is low and rich as molasses.*
*She bites into the cookie, her mouth flooding with sugar and spices, and smiles up at—*

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Rei asks.

The memory pops like a bubble and suddenly it’s like trying to recall a dream, every detail turning hazy and vanishing when she tries to focus on it. The woman’s face, whatever it was she was saying, the sound of the other girl’s laughter, the colors of the icing, all fall once again out of reach.

She feels something on her cheek, and realizes it’s a tear when she rushes it away. “I think so,” she says. When she smells the cookie again, trying to bring back the memory, the only thing it summons is the same overwhelming nostalgia. Her voice cracks when she speaks again, words struggling to escape the lump forming in her throat. “There was a memory, for a second. I think my grandma made these for us.” Her eyes burn, and she wipes away tears before they can cool her cheeks.

“A sister, or maybe a cousin? I don’t—” She’s losing the battle against her tears, already feeling them well up. “I don’t know who it was,” she admits, the words feeling cold and empty.

Rei has his chair next to her in an instant, letting her bury her face in his shoulder. He wraps an arm around her, holding her close as she lets her tears fall onto his jacket. The memory fades by the second, and as much as it hurts, she can’t help but try and hold onto it.

“Can we talk about something else?” she finally asks, voice strained.

“Of course.” They both sit up, Akari wiping her eyes in the hopes no one will notice she was crying. “Try and eat something? You’ll feel better.”

“Right.” She takes a tentative forkful of food, bracing herself for another memory. It doesn’t come, and she relaxes a little. “You’ve been studying Wurmple, right?” she asks, longing for something to take her mind off her homesickness. “Can you tell me about it?”

He readily launches into an explanation of his research as they eat, not sparing any nerdy details. Akari finds herself smiling again, soothed by the familiarity of his voice. The memory of the memory still aches in her heart by the time they’re done eating, but it’s faded enough to be manageable.

“How are you feeling?” Rei asks, finishing the last of Akari’s cookies.

“Better. Thank you, for talking that whole time. It really helped.”

“I’m glad.” The two of them stand up to put their plates away. “I really can’t imagine what that feels like, but I’ll always be around if you need help.”

Akari hugs him, nearly catching him off guard. She wants to say something but *the words* stick in her throat, so she contents herself with hugging her best friend and feeling him hug her back.

“Are you still up for celebrating?” he asks once they separate. “Everyone’s releasing our lanterns out on Prelude Beach soon.”

“I never made a lantern,” she frowns. “There wasn’t any time once I got back.”

“I know, I made two earlier.”

He only seems a little less surprised when she hugs him again.

***

Akari sits next to Rei on the beach, her jacket pulled close around her shoulders to protect her from the wind. The beach is more sparsely decorated than the town, but lights hang from trees and there's a crackling fire a few yards from shore, illuminating the handful of people who still sit on the cold beach. Flareon sleeps next to her, and she absentmindedly scratches him behind the ears. Most people have returned by now, their lanterns long since placed in the water and carried away, but Akari's entranced with how the lights float off over the water and into the night.

"Hey," Rei nudges her, pointing off to the other side of the beach. "Look who it is."

She squints, gazing out towards the shore, and smiles when she recognizes the familiar dark coat and the man wearing it. She waves her hand high above her head, certainly looking more than a little silly, but succeeds in catching Ingo's attention. He offers her a small smile and a nod before turning back to the ocean.

"I think this is my favorite holiday," Akari decides, smiling as she watches the lanterns form constellations over the water.

"You cried over a cookie less than two hours ago."

She flicks him on the shoulder. "I'm serious! I know I've been a little absorbed in my research lately, but I'm really glad I got to see everyone today."

"I know how you feel. Today went surprisingly well, considering. And it was fun, the two of us going out exploring together."

That makes her perk up. "Yeah? You wanna do it again soon?"

"...We'll see."

She looks down at her Pokémon, napping gently away at her side. "I'm gonna say something really cheesy, and you're not allowed to make fun of me for it."

"We'll see," he repeats, grinning this time.

"If I had to end up somewhere with no memories, I'm glad it was here. I'm glad I got to celebrate the solstice with the people I care about."

"Aw, that's not cheesy." He wraps an arm around her, pulling her into a half-hug that makes her heart warm. "I'm glad you're here too, Akari."

"Gingerbread and Paper Lanterns"

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WHOO!

WAIT UP ASH!

PIKA!

SHHHK

ARE YOU OKAY?

SNOWY AND I ARE FINE BUT...

EXHAUSTED.

COLD

WIPEOUT!!

HOW ABOUT YOU USE A POKEMON TO LIGHT A FIRE ASH!

GREAT IDEA ROTOM.

GO LITTEN!

LITTEN USED EMBER!

GREAT THINKING YOU GUYS!

PIKA...

END.

Artofmaddy @ beacons.ai/artofmaddy

# Wisdom Comes With Winter

Snow was a rarity in Pallet Town. Snow was a rarity in all of Kanto, what with it being situated so close to the world's Equator. With the waters of the nearby ocean to buffer the extremes of the seasons, winters in the sleepy coastal settlement were comparably milder than those of cities just a few routes north; while Pewter City and even Viridian City could count on at least a few heavy snowfalls, it was a major event indeed for Pallet Town to experience even a brief episode of flurries.

In his lifetime, Red had never seen real snow, even when he'd traveled to the northern reaches of Kanto. His mother had only seen it once or twice, and even the oldest geezer in town could probably count on one hand the number of times he's seen legitimate snow in Pallet Town.

One could imagine Red's surprise— and delight— when he awoke to find a dense layer of soft, fluffy white snow blanketing every inch of the place, turning his already picturesque and serene hometown into a verifiable winter wonderland.

Red sprang forth from his bed and raced to his closet with the speed of a Volt Tackle.

His Pikachu, whom had been curled up at his feet and still snoozing peacefully, squeaked as it was jolted awake by the frenzy of Red's movements.

It tottered unsteadily to its feet, rubbing the sleep from its lidded, sleep-heavy eyes; said eyes shot wide open when it registered several of Red's shirts sailing toward the bed. Its cry of alarm was cut off as it was promptly buried beneath three tee-shirts, two pairs of jean shorts, some cargo pants, and a light sweater. It wiggled its way through the articles of clothing until it managed to pop its head through the bottom of the sweater, just in time for Red to make his way over to the bed, donned in several layers of shirts and jackets, a pair of jeans, some heavy-duty boots, and a matching set of ruby-red woolen gloves, a hat, and a scarf.

Snow might be rare in Pallet Town, but Red's mother had always believed in being prepared.

Red's faithful partner was very vocal in voicing its displeasure at being so rudely awakened, pointing repeatedly at the surrounding clothes while chittering angrily. It then took notice of Red's strange attire, and its ire quickly made way for a rush of curiosity. It wriggled free of the clothing and scampered to the edge of the bed so it could give the tassled ends of Red's scarf a vigorous sniffing.  It then looked to the window, having caught in its peripheral vision the steadily falling snow, and its ears perked straight up in a mixture of wonder and anxiety.  It released a slightly distressed croon and looked to Red for reassurance; Red just chuckled and produced a another red scarf and a matching hat with two extensions clearly meant for a Pikachu's long, pointed ears.

His mother had purchased it out of a Celadon City Department Store catalogue while Red was off on his adventure, along with the set that Red was wearing now.

*"You never know!"* she'd chirped when she'd presented them to Red upon his return home, along with the assortment of other odds and ends she'd bought him while he was away. *"You may decide to travel to other regions one day— and the other regions get plenty of snow!"*

That preparedness of hers always paid off, Red thought with another light chuckle, even if it was in ways she didn't expect.

Red smiled as he wound the knitted scarf around the Pikachu's neck. He made sure it was tied snugly but not constrictingly, then gently tugged the hat over the Pokémon's delicate ears until it was nestled firmly on its head. He then tugged on the end of the scarf.

"Do you like it?"

His Pikachu reached up to paw at the soft woolen hat with a fascinated warble, then jumped down from the bed and scampered over to the full-length mirror leaned against the wall next to Red's closet.

It admired its reflection with a series of sounds that seemed to be the Pikachu equivalent of *"ooh's"* and *"ahh's"*, then nodded firmly in satisfaction. It whirled on its heels, raced back over to Red, and clambered up his body to perch on his shoulder.

The message was clear: *"Ready to go!"*

Just as eager to experience the novelty of a bonafide snowfall, Red wasted no time in heading downstairs. He was instantly met by his mother, who did a thorough inspection of his winter gear; after pulling the zipper of his overcoat up to his neck and raising the faux fur-lined hood, she deemed Red adequately prepared and sent him on his merry way. When Red headed for the door, he heard his mother mutter under her breath, "I *knew* I should have gotten those mittens for Pikachu, too! Oh, I hope its little paws will be okay…"

In response to his mother's fretting, Red's Pikachu vigorously blew on its paws and rapidly rubbed them together.
Red idled by the front door, waiting for his friend to finish its preparations. His hand was wrapped around the doorknob; even through the thick fabric of his knitted gloves, he could feel the freezing chill that had seeped into the metal from the outside. It should have been a portent that no amount of preparation could prepare Red and Pikachu for what was to come. Alas, they were blissfully ignorant of the harshness of winter's thrall; when Pikachu signaled to Red that it was again ready to brave the snow, Red wasted no time at all in flinging the door open.

Their initial cries were those of amazement. Pallet Town looked like a scene plucked from a postcard.

The snow blanketed the ground in heavy drifts like scoops of ice cream, sprinkled the surrounding evergreens like powdered sugar, rested heavy upon the eaves of the houses and dolloped the windowsills like layers of rich icing.

And the houses— they looked more inviting than ever; all of them glowed from within with soft orange light that refracted in the swirling patterns of ice adorning the panes of each and every window. Here and there, trails of footsteps marked the paths of Pallet Town's residents (and a few curious Pokémon) where they had likewise braved the foreign weather and walked around to marvel at their hometown's radical transformation.

Red and Pikachu's shouts of delight, however, quickly morphed into high-pitched wails of dismay chopped to pieces by their chattering teeth when the first gust of wind hit them.

*It's colder than I thought it would be!* Red thought wildly. *There are people who live like this year-round! How do they stand it?!*

Red and Pikachu both had been on the receiving ends of a fair number of Icy Winds, but those were balmy breezes compared to the frosty gale that blasted into them right when Red took his first tentative step into the snow. It buffeted Red with such force that he actually stumbled back over the threshold and had to grab the doorframe with one hand to keep from tumbling to his rump. It was a cold akin to the freezing gales generated by an Articuno's dazzling azure wings, but Red did not retreat; he ducked his head, shielded his face with his arm, and squinted against the harsh, howling wind that was pelting his face with snowflakes and chips of ice.

The same could not be said for Pikachu, however. That was all it took for Red's dauntless companion to burrow himself into the warm shelter of Red's jacket; it squeezed into the small space between his throat and the lined interior of his overcoat's hood and coiled itself around his neck like an Ekans—

an Ekans that had feasted on one too many Rattata and now resembled a sausage, anyway. Pikachu voiced its displeasure with a long, low whine, to which Red responded by reaching into his hood to reassuringly pat its quivering rump.

*Well, that was a shock.*

Red was about to get another, and not from his Pikachu.

"Ha! What'sa matter, Red? Can't handle a little cold?"

With how close Red came to hitting the ground again, one would think that the wind had kicked up even fiercer than before; however, the air was now still and silent, filled only with delicate snowflakes drifting down from the cloudy gray sky. The sudden address had just given Red such a start that he'd whirled on his heel,and the sole of his boot had slipped in a patch of slushy, half-melted snow.

Red just hadn't been expecting to see Blue so soon. Their last encounter hadn't exactly been pleasant, what with Red stripping the guy of his title as Pokémon Champion within two seconds of him inheriting it. It had been a messy business all around, and Red had felt bad about it, really. He wouldn't go so far as to say that he and Blue were friends (mostly on account of Blue probably finding the idea laughable at best and abhorrent at worst), but he respected the guy. Red had hated doing him dirty like that; he really had. What was he supposed to have done, though? Giving up on his own aspirations was out of the question, and even if Red had wanted to let Blue savor his victory for more than ten minutes and leave, Red would've had to have done it over Blue's dead body. Red had only ever had one option, as much as it sucked.

That being said, Red wouldn't blame Blue if he truly hated him now. Ever since that day, Red figured that Blue wouldn't deign to look at him ever again— much less talk to him. Even if it wasn't the result of righteous fury, Red could easily imagine how painful it would be— to be reminded of your greatest humiliation every time you looked at somebody. If their positions had been reversed, Red didn't know if he could take a defeat like that graciously, at least not for a good long while.

For all that, there Blue was, calling out to Red with the same smug bearing and shit-eating grin as always. One hand was on his hip, and the other was stroking the fluffy mane of his Eevee, which was perched on his left shoulder. To Red's minor annoyance, Blue wasn't bundled up nearly as much as he was; wherever he'd been sulking for the past several months, it had clearly been snowy. Evidently, it had also restored his fighting spirit; Red could see it there, burning in hazel eyes like a Charizard's mighty flame— an all-consuming inferno that could only be satiated by *victory*.

"Well, then? Are you too busy shiverin' to battle me, or what? I've come a long way, yanno. Better not be for nothin'!"

Red was glad to see that the insufferable neighbor boy he'd chased around all of Kanto was still alive and kicking.

There was nothing like a battle to get Red's blood pumping. What better way to stave off the cold? Before he could so much as nod his assent, however, another voice— this one as sharp as a Pidgeot's screeching cry— pierced the cold morning air.

"Oh, Blue Oak, I *know* you did not just walk out here and do the *exact* thing I just told you *not to do!*"

All of the color drained from Blue's face, leaving it as white as the snow drifts around them. Frozen to the spot, he just gaped wide-eyed and open-mouthed at Red despite the angry grunts of his mother plowing through the snow to rapidly approach him from behind. Red cringed as the woman marched up to Blue, stopped mere centimeters behind him, crossed her arms, and demanded him to face her with a shrill *"Ahem!"*

*"Maaaaaaaaaa,"* Blue whined as he slowly rotated on a heel to face his mother. She quickly silenced him with a sharp, snappy waggle of her finger.

Sensing that in the middle of a mother-son spat was no place to be, Blue's Eevee made like Red's Pikachu and dove down into the front of Blue's overcoat. It squirmed and fidgeted in rising discomfort as Blue's mother proceeded to tear into him like Spearows into fresh carrion.

"Don't you *'Maaaaaaaa!'* me!" she barked. "What, you think that because you're a Pokémon Champion that you can just do whatever you want now?"

"But it's *Red!*" Blue protested with a stamp of his foot and a point at Red, who was trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible by scratching at the peeling paint on the doorjamb. "I'm *not* Champion anymore, thanks to him, remember? I just spent two months training my butt off so I could come back and kick his!"

"Well, it looks like you'll have to save it for later," Blue's mother replied primly.

"The practice field is snowed under and covered with fallen trees, and it's too dangerous to leave Pallet Town because of the inclement weather. I won't have my son wrecking half the town because he's incapable of controlling his urges!"

Suddenly, Red felt some primal prey response from deep within him activate. The hairs on the back of his neck rose, the blood surged in his arteries, and all of his senses went on high-alert. He froze on the spot; he could *feel* bloodthirsty eyes boring into the back of his head, *feel* the weight pressing down on him, *feel* the threat of death rolling in waves off the figure that slowly approached to loom behind him like the spectral form of a Gengar.

"Ohoho, I do hope that *my* son didn't have any notions of waging battle in the streets like some awful little *miscreant,"* Red's mother breathed against the back of his hood. "I raised him better than *that."*

Perhaps it was the pure and utter fear that had Red gripped in its icy claws, but he *swore* he could feel the heat of her breath bleeding through the fabric. Terrified for his life, Red vigorously shook his head. He did it so fast that static electricity sparked in the areas where his skin rubbed against Pikachu's fur, but a few zaps was a small price to pay to avoid one of his mother's vicious tongue-lashings.

Blue apparently had zero sense of self-preservation because he whipped his head around to pout at Red's mother and cried, "Hey! Who're you callin' a miscreant?"

*No! Blue! You idiot! Haven't you heard the saying 'let sleeping Charizard lie'? Why would you poke one that's awake?!*

As his mother's killing intent surged to dangerous levels, Red stumbled off the stoop and out into the snow, desperate not to end up as collateral damage. He was being driven entirely by instinct at that moment, but some noble part of him managed to hold sway against the panic and act in Blue's defense as well; Red's clumsy feet carried him right over to Blue, who he awkwardly grabbed by the fabric of his jacket and started hauling him away. In those short seconds, Blue had unquestionably looked death in the eyes and recognized his folly because he didn't protest one bit.

"Play like normal boys and have a snowball fight or something, won't you?" Red's mother called cheerily after them.

Red and Blue waited until they were all the way across town before collapsing to their knees in the snow, panting and broken out in cold sweat from their collective brush with death. After several seconds of sitting their in shocked silence, Blue swallowed thickly, raked a shaky hand through his hair, and glanced at Red through the corners of his eyes.

"Man. I forgot how scary our moms could be."

Red nodded slowly in agreement. With a sigh, he leaned back on his knees; the wet snow was already seeping through the fabric of his jeans and underclothes to chill his legs, but he was too euphoric with relief to care.

Sensing that the danger had passed, Pikachu wiggled its way out of his hood and peered around; Blue's Eevee did the same, popping its head out of the neckline of Blue's jacket with a chirp. After inspecting their surroundings, the two Pokémon looked at each other.

They held theirgazes for several seconds, engaged in silent conversation; then, in unison, they sprang from their sheltering places and dove into the snow, where they immediately engaged in a playful tussling match. Red watched them with a warm smile. Time and time again they'd battled each other, yet the two Pokémon didn't blink at the idea of engaging in lighthearted fun together.

"Humph. They make it look easy."

Red glanced up to see Blue watching the two with a pensive frown. He must have felt Red staring, because his gaze flickered to him; he then rolled his eyes.

"Being friends, I mean."

Red blinked and cocked his head to the side.

"Oh, don't give me that look. You've met me," Blue muttered, shifting so that his legs were crossed underneath him. Red imagined that Blue would normally start plucking blades of grass and shredding them; there was none available, so he started unraveling a loose thread in one of his gloves instead. For quite a length of time, he picked at his glove in silence, clearly debating on whether or not he wanted to dive down this hole with Red. Finally, however, he chuckled bitterly to himself and sighed, "Might as well spill my guts. Ain't like I got any pride left. Besides, you always were the better listener of the two of us."

Red frowned, his curiosity at Blue's uncharacteristic change in demeanor replaced with growing concern.

It seemed that Blue hadn't regrouped from his defeat at the Indigo Plateau like Red had thought. But, Red just gave a tiny nod for Blue to continue. Perhaps this was a good thing… a turning point.

"I'm loud. I'm obnoxious. I'm impulsive." He sucked in a sharp breath, and it came out as a fogged whisper, shaking with the weight of uncertainty, "And I'm constantly acting like I'm the best because I'm terrified of the idea of being nothing at all."

Blue laughed, but it wasn't because it was joking. No, it seemed to Red like Blue felt that if he didn't laugh, he would cry— and there was no way he would cry in front of Red. Yet that laugh of Blue's made Red's heart constrict just as hard as his tears would have because it was the most joyless, most self-deprecating, most *scared* laugh he'd ever heard.

"You probably think I'm just a terrible person, don't you? Complaining because my gramps' is a world-famous researcher and my old man's a world-famous Trainer," Blue scoffed, tearing another thread free from his glove as he bitterly hung his head. "Most people would kill for folks like that. Meanwhile, I'm all wrapped up in the fear that I won't ever measure up." Blue laughed soullessly again and tossed the frayed threads from his glove onto the snow. "Yeah, Red. It's hard for me to make friends. Ain't nobody wanna be friends with my sorry butt, and I can't blame 'em."

"I do," Red murmured without a moment's pause. "I want… to be your friend, Blue."

Blue's head snapped back up to gawk at him, completely flabbergasted.

What?”

Red flushed, both at Blue’s reaction and the realization that he’d spoken aloud. Red had always struggled with selective mutism; it probably wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that Red had spoken a grand total of ten words to Blue in the many years that they’d known each other. Three of those had been on the Plateau, upon watching Blue crumple with the realization that his dream had been snatched from his hands before he’d even gotten a firm grip on it—*“Are you okay?”* Blue had been so out of sorts that he hadn’t really registered the significance of it… of Red being able to ask that aloud, even with the Elite Four right there.

Apparently, Red hadn’t fully grasped it, either— how important it was to have Blue in his life.

“I want to be your friend,” Red repeated firmly.

Blue’s mouth slowly shut. He stared blankly at Red for several seconds, measuring his sincerity. Red resolutely held the intense stare and did his best to convey the seriousness of his admission. After what seemed like a lifetime, Blue’s stony expression softened; the tension in his features relaxed, and his mouth twitched into the barest hint of a genuine smile.

“All right, then. Just remember: you asked for this.”

Before Red could tilt his head to the side in inquiry, Blue promptly scooped up a handful of snow and flung it into Red’s face.

The sound that Red made as the soft, powdery stuff exploded in his face was quite unflattering, but he was too busy reeling from the shock of the sudden cold to care about his image. Through the bits of snow clinging to his lashes, he could see Blue rolling around next to him, holding his belly as he cracked up with laughter. When Blue caught Red looking at him, he squawked in a mixture of alarm and delight and hurriedly scrambled to his feet to start sprinting away.

“Haul butt, Eevee! Playtime’s over! There are snowballs to be made!”

Red gasped with indignance as he wiped the snow from his face and eyes, then hunched over to start forming a proper snowball with a growl. His Pikachu— now bereft of a playmate— joined him, flipping down Red’s hood to pile pint-sized snowballs into it with affronted chitters. In no time at all, they had cobbled together a large pile of them. Red loaded as many as he could into the crook of his left arm, waited for his Pikachu to clamber onto his shoulder to take up position with the stockpile in his hood, and then hauled himself to his feet so he could set off after Blue with a breathless grin—

but not before letting the whole of his team out to get in on the fun. Their mothers had forbidden them from engaging in a Pokémon battle in the middle of town, but as long as they didn’t use their moves, it wasn’t exactly a battle, was it? Besides, Red spoiled Pikachu a lot; he couldn’t let it be the only one to experience the joy of a snow day.

Blue seemed to share Red's line of thinking, for when Blue found him posted up on the backside of his grandfather's laboratory, it was with his entire team armed to the teeth with snowballs.

"Today's the day I wipe the floor with ya, Red!" Blue crowed defiantly from atop his hastily-made fort of metal odds and ends packed with snow. "But hey, since you're my friend and all, I'll give ya one chance to surrender!"

Red nodded to his Machamp, who proceeded to launch four massive snowballs at Blue in quick succession.

That was as good a signal for the others to start chucking snowballs as any. Left, right, up, down; they flew in all directions, propelled by strong arms, flung with psychic powers, dropped in bucketloads from overhead. At the center of it all was Red and Blue, howling with laughter and grinning madly with joy as they chased each other through the snow drifts, for once focused entirely on each other rather than their Pokémon.

That alone would have turned heads, but the massive ruckus generated by the addition of the Pokémon to the mix quickly drew a crowd. Soon, others took up snowballs, and it wasn't long before it became one big Pallet Town free-for-all. Not that Red and Blue really noticed— until one Professor Oak came onto the scene, looking to see who was causing such a commotion just outside his laboratory.

"Well, now! *This* is a sight!" he chortled as he beheld the two teens, dusted with snow and glowing with mirth.

"'Sup, Gramps?" Blue puffed out between deep breaths.

Red raised a hand in greeting; the other was pressed against his abdomen, soothing the burning pain in the muscles there.

"You two sure look like you're having fun," the professor hummed while stroking his chin. There was a knowing twinkle in his eyes that made Red smile. It widened when caught Blue's eyes out of the corners of his own, and Blue's grin broadened.

"Yeah, we are. Mind if we get back to it?"

"Do I mind? No, no, of course not. I'm glad you two boys are finally seeing eye-to-eye," Professor Oak chuckled warmly.

Red gasped as he felt it again: that primal prey response, that feeling of suddenly being caught in the gaze of a predator, that dreadful realization that death was at his doorstep.

*"I hope **you** don't mind if I join in."*

Red and Blue simultaneously screamed when, out of nowhere and with speed like lightning, the professor procured two snowballs from behind his back and lobbed them straight at them. They exploded against the teens' chests with such force that they were flung onto their backs. Stunned, they lay there for several seconds, deaf to the chorus of sickened *"ooh's"* and pleasantly surprised laughs from the surrounding crowd.

Abruptly, Blue wheezed, "Alliance?"

"Alliance," Red groaned with a nod.

Still flat on their backs, they shook on it; then, using their grips on each other's hands as leverage, they climbed to their feet. They let go to brush the snow off their fronts and backs, then shot matching glowers of determination at the professor, who was lording over his surprise attack. Guess Red knew where Blue's smug streak came from.

"By the time we're done with you, you're gonna wanna be in a home, old man!" Blue taunted.

"Ohoho, I *know* your mother taught you to respect your elders, boy," came the professor's snickered response. "But rest assured, you will by the time *I'm* done with *you*."

"Let's find out if we make a good team, yeah?" Red said under his breath to Blue.

"Hah!" Blue scoffed. "Ain't no doubt about it. We're the best there is."

Blue must have started rubbing off on him already, for he could only describe the grin that split his face then as haughty.

"Then let's prove it."

"You're not so bad at all, Red!" Blue tossed his head back with a cackle. When he looked back to the professor, it was with the game face that had grown comfortingly familiar to Red. "Let's do it! You and me! Together!"

*Yes,* Red thought with a smile. *Let's show the world what we're made of... together.*

"Wisdom Comes With Winters"

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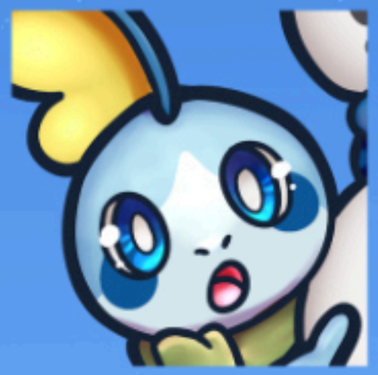

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